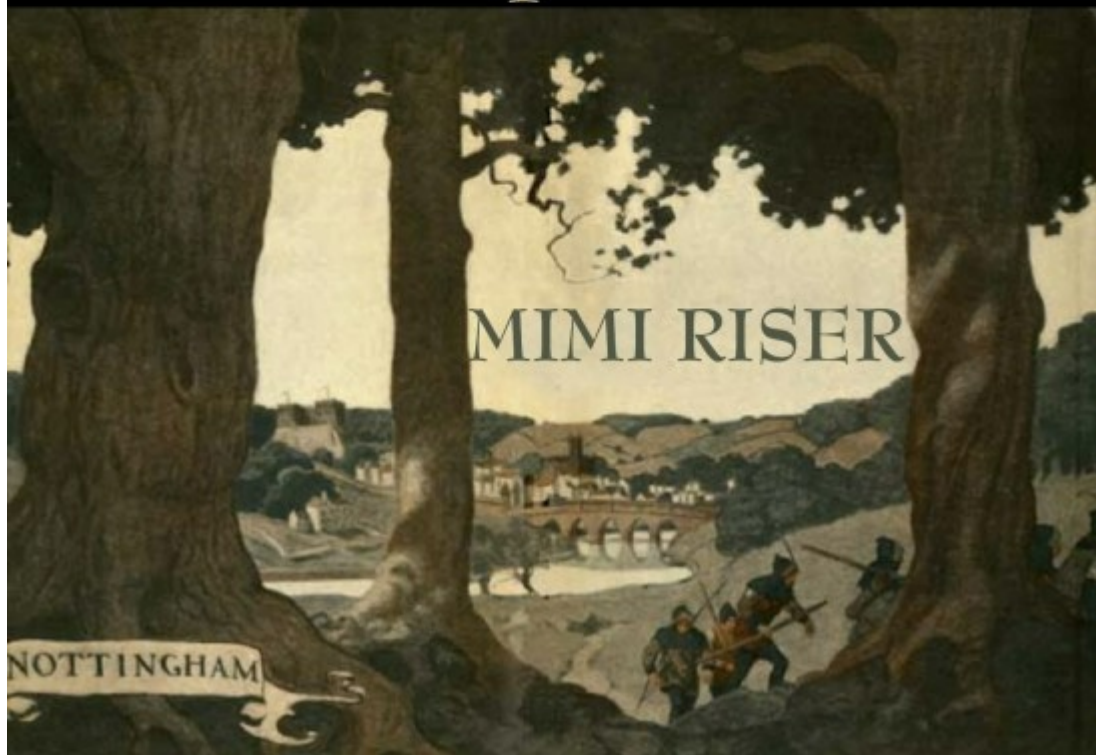




SHERWOOD

A Robin Hood Time-Travel Romance

The Complete Novel



MIMI RISER

NOTTINGHAM

“Ms. Riser turns the whole legend of Robin Hood on its head... When the final secrets are revealed (and there is more than one!) this story of love, romance and fantasy will have you smiling incessantly.” ~*A Romance Review*

“Her story shines against a rich, vivid background of the long ago, far away world that is fascinating... This proves that a book can be both fun and have a touch of an epic sweep, all at once.” ~*Huntress Reviews*

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MIMI RISER

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Note: This novel was originally published under the title *Sherwood Charade*.



Chapter 1

"Hey, man, how 'bout this one? Gotta cool lookin' castle on the cover."

"Castle? No way. Sounds like them hysterical romance stories my sister reads."

"Not 'hysterical,' Nelson. *Historical*."

"Yeah, well they're pretty hysterical, too. All that love stuff's a buncha crap."

"How the hell would you know? You ain't never been in love."

"Huh. And you have?"

"Know more 'bout it than you do."

"Yeah, I'll just bet. So what you got there anyway? If it ain't a love story, what is that castle book, huh?"

"If you'd shut up for two seconds, I could read the back and tell you. Some kind of adventure, I think... Yeah. Says here it's 'bout this dude who goes way back in time to..."

Camelot. Hey, why not? It sounded okay to Marian Allanson. Not as good as Sherwood Forest, which would have been her first choice, but not bad. More interesting than Philadelphia's North Broad Street where she currently sat—in general locale. In specific locale she sat behind the back counter of Mueller's Used Books. Even more specifically she sat behind Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*—original Middle English version, of course—or, rather, she hid behind it. Being one of those big doorstopper editions with lots of pictures and maps and stuff, it made a great hiding book. She used it a lot.

Peeking over the top she watched the duo in the front of the store. Their arms buried to the elbows in the overflowing paperback bin near the entrance, the two boys looked like a couple of pint-sized pirates eagerly sorting their booty. Last week they'd shoplifted *Treasure Island* and *The Time Machine*. Today it looked like they were after Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

Good choice. Marian approved. She'd read that novel herself when she was about their age. Her copy had been pilfered from Frank Mueller, too.

"The kids 'round here been stealing me blind for years," he'd confessed her first day on the job. "It's a sport, a right-of-passage for 'em. But it gets 'em reading, too. I figure it's better they snitch books from me than smoke dope in the alleys." His main business was in the back room anyway, where the antique manuscripts were stored in fireproof safes. "That's where the real money is. Buy low, sell high. Too high, if possible. But my big clients can afford a little rip-off," he'd said between puffs on his ever-present pipe. "I'm like Robin Hood. I rob from the rich to give to the poor."

Robin Hood?

Now there was an image for you: gray haired Frank Mueller—all five-foot, two and a half inches of him—romping through Sherwood in green tights and feathered cap. Would his pipe get tangled in the bowstring when he shot an arrow?

He must have known how the reference would grab her attention. He would have remembered how Robin Hood had always been her favorite character, how she used to scour the store looking for books about him. And how disappointed she'd been to read that her hero was just a myth, a fanciful folktale with no proven historical basis.

"Marian?" Mueller's gravelly voice broke into the reverie, pulling her back to the business at hand. Right. Mustn't make this too easy for the kids. That would

spoil their fun.

“Forbidden fruit is always the sweetest,” he whispered, his eyes blinking like an owl’s as he peered at her from behind coke-bottle spectacles. “That’s why I hired you, remember?”

Marian nodded. They went through this every day. She never believed him, but she’d given up arguing. This was Mueller’s story and he was sticking to it. The job offer had nothing to do with the fact that he’d known her since she was shorter than he, that his store had been the one solid constant in her life, her home away from all those homes she never had. And it certainly wasn’t because fresh out of college now, with no family and a ton of loans to pay off, she needed the work. Heck no. What did she think he was anyway? Some old softy? Him? *Tiger* Mueller?

Not a chance. It was just that the old tiger had been spending so much time recently in his back lair, theft in the front of the store had tapered off to a trickle. It had become too easy, no challenge to it anymore—or so Mueller said. Thus he’d hired a clerk, a watchdog. Marian Allanson. Her job was to sit up here looking stern and menacing. That would keep these young hoodlums reading!

“I wanna take a closer look at that manuscript I bought yesterday,” the old man declared loudly. With a scraping of wood and creaking of arthritic joints he slid out from behind his end of the long, cluttered counter. “You keep an eye on things out here, and mind you look sharp!” He shot her a conspiratorial wink, then shuffled out of view, wheezing like a bronchial pipe-organ with bad bellows.

Rising to the occasion as best she could Marian dropped Chaucer with a nice noticeable thud and put on her sternest expression for the benefit of the two young pirates at the paperback bin.

Mueller peeked back through the door of his office before closing it, shook his head at the sight of her glowering over the counter. She did try, bless her heart, but small, pale and delicate, with riotous ruddy curls hanging halfway to her waist, and big soulful blue eyes, she looked about as menacing as a piece of Dresden china. And as transparent as glass. He heaved a raspy sigh as the door clicked shut behind him. He couldn’t help it. Neither could Marian, of course; he knew that.

Chewing on the stem of his pipe he unlocked the nearest safe and removed a fragile bundle of thirteenth century parchment, a quirky old Latin text by some obscure scholar called Roland of Hunterdon. Very rare, very precious. Very odd. Sort of like his clerk. The girl didn’t belong in this kind of world. She was like someone from another era almost, like a character in a Jane Austen novel, or some princess out of a fairytale. How she’d survived this long was a mystery to him. Considering her background, it was a miracle.

He shuddered to think what could have happened if they’d never met. It must have been Kismet that brought her into his store twelve years ago. Poor kid, looking so sad and alone. She’d been the first shoplifter he’d ever let escape. Instead of calling the cops on her that day, he’d called them *for* her. Pretty damn ironic to consider that stealing a book might have saved her life.

Which one had she filched? A novel wasn’t it? Dickens? Stevenson? Twain! That was it. Mueller’s owl eyes crinkled as he paused a moment to fish the title out of his memory. Not *Tom Sawyer*, not *Huckleberry Finn*...

“*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*,” Nelson read off the cover of the book he’d been handed. He sounded indignant, cheated. “Lando, you dumb-ass, I thought you said this was a time-travel story.”

“Dumb-ass, yourself. It *is* a time-travel story.”

“Oh yeah? Well, if it’s got a Yankee in it, it looks like a *baseball* story to me.”

“It doesn’t mean *that* kind of Yankee. Man, Nelson, if buttheads had wings you’d be a jumbo jet.”

So it went every time the pair entered Mueller’s Used Books—also known as “Mueller’s Reading Program for Underprivileged Youngsters” to those honored few in the old man’s confidence. Glaring sternly from her post behind the counter Marian fidgeted with a loose thread on her sweater and wished they’d settle the argument and make their getaway, because she doubted her glare would hold out much longer. Orlando Demitrios Konstantinos and his sidekick Nelson were like a ghetto version of Abbott and Costello.

The street door banged opened and closed, bringing a blast of blaring horns, city dust and traffic fumes into the store. Booted steps thudded over the scarred wood floor. Swallowing back a sudden flutter of nerves Marian rose from her perch to greet the newcomer. “Can I help you?”

Hmm, just an average looking man in leather jacket and jeans, but the way his eyes scanned the place he certainly seemed like he needed help. Unfortunately. Was he here for the antiques? Not that he looked wealthy enough—or academic enough—for the good stuff, but you couldn’t always go by looks. Maybe she’d better call ol’ Tiger.

She started toward the closed office door, then hesitated when she heard mumbled Latin on the other side. Mr. Mueller must be reading to himself again; he did that a lot. What a pretty passage. It sounded like poetry. Darn, he’d probably hate an interruption. Her gaze wavered between the door and the newcomer, whose eyes met hers and then raked over her as though she were part of the merchandise.

“Don’t mind me, sugar. Just browsing.” He flashed her a crooked grin.

Or was that a leer? Whatever. Marian didn’t smile back.

“Quite a place you got here,” he offered—pleasantly enough, she supposed, but he still gave her the willies. “Don’t think I’ve ever seen so many books before.”

“We try to keep a good stock.” She kept her eyes on him as he worked his way toward her and the back counter, picking up a volume here, laying it down there. Just browsing, huh? Why didn’t she believe him? His manner seemed almost too casual for a simple browser. And those eyes. And that grin... Apprehension raised gooseflesh on her arms and she shivered, her pulse skipping, her breath suddenly short and shallow.

No, not a panic attack, not now. This was ridiculous. There was no reason to be frightened. The poor guy was probably only killing time while he waited for a bus or an appointment or something.

Mentally slapping herself she drew a deep breath and rubbed the goose bumps away. This had nothing to do with him. It was just her paranoia raising its ugly head again. Most males made her skin crawl, except for the very young or the very old, like Orlando and Mr. Mueller. And Robin Hood... But since he wasn’t real, and would be dead now even if he were, she supposed she shouldn’t count him. Too bad. Or maybe not. She should probably stop thinking of Robin Hood, period. It was stupid. An “unhealthy fixation,” her late uncle had once said, and if anyone knew about unhealthy fixations it was her uncle. She wished she hadn’t remembered.

Damn, this was giving her a headache. Why didn’t the man just buy a book and leave?

Glancing toward the front she noticed Orlando acting oddly. It didn’t help her mood. Crouched by the paperback bin he was elbowing Nelson and watching

their browser the way a wary rodent watches something it's unsure is a cat or not.

"Hey, man, stick your head out the door and see if you can spot any cops," the boy whispered. "You see one, tell him to get his ass in here quick."

"You nuts? What the hell you want a *cop* for?" Nelson obviously found the request a sick joke. "You hopin' maybe a uniform'll convince me this Yankee book's 'bout time-travel? Huh?" He gave a disgusted grunt. "I *know* better, Lando. It ain't got no time-machine in it. The cover just says this dude gets knocked in the head and when he wakes up he's thousands of miles away, right?"

"Thousands of miles away *and* hundreds of years in the past." Orlando's eyes never left the browser. "The knock on the head is what sends him back through time, okay?"

"No. It don't make no sense."

"Nelson, I ain't got time to argue. Just shove your fool head out that door and do like I told you. Move!"

"I'll move, but it still don't make no sense. How can a knock on the head send someone back through time?" Nelson grumbled.

But his friend no longer listened. As the browser reached for something in his jacket Orlando launched forward, straight down the center aisle, and vaulted over the counter. He hit Marian with a flying tackle that sent her crashing down like a sacked quarterback on the line of scrimmage. Her head snapped back against the floor with a sickening thud, and that was the last thing she remembered... Until she awoke with a throbbing skull to find herself thousands of miles away.

And hundreds of years in the past.

"Uh-oh." Orlando's voice, small and hushed, sounded younger than she'd ever heard him. "I think Mark Twain might have been on to something."

He had? Marian was afraid to open her eyes and find out, but she had the awful feeling Orlando was right. The feeling intensified as she inhaled. Her nose wrinkled. What was that smell? Something...moist, green...something lush and alive.

Fresh air.

She almost choked on it. Yikes. This didn't smell like the city. Didn't sound like the city, didn't feel like it. Instead of floorboards beneath her back, she felt a damp cushion of...

Blindly, she groped to the side. Her fingers closed around a handful of... *Old salad?* Really gritty old salad. *Ick.* That couldn't be right. She explored further by touch.

Leaves, twigs, earth... Damn.

Her stomach turned over. She was lying half buried in mulch. Where no mulch should be. Either she or the ground was in the wrong place, and somehow she doubted it was the ground.

From all around came soft scrapings and rustlings. Small bodies scurrying through brush? Her stomach did another flip-flop. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, listening, concentrating, trying to separate the sounds.

Chirps and twitters above... Birdcalls.

Airy whispering... A breeze in high branches.

Forest noises.

Marvy. She'd never been in a forest before, but she'd imagined plenty. Well, one particular forest anyway, and this was exactly what it sounded like.

Marian stifled a sob. If it were just her, she'd know where she was, know she was dreaming. But this couldn't be a dream, could it? She wasn't alone. Orlando lay half on top and pressed against her side, his breath feathering her face, adding a hint of beef and grilled onions to the earthy green smell. He must have had a cheese steak for lunch—not that it had any bearing on their current predicament, but she couldn't help noticing.

The boy's heart raced, pounding like a jackhammer against the outside of her ribs. Her own heart pounded with it. Her head pounded even harder. *Steady, Marian, he's just a kid, he's scared. Get a grip on it—for his sake.* She forced open her eyes to see him staring down, his nose nearly touching her own. He looked so worried. She didn't blame him. She was worried, too.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, his dark eyes huge with concern.

He was worried about *her*? What a sweet boy. She managed a weak smile. "My head's sore, but I'll be all right." *I hope.* "How about you?"

"Me? Hell, I'm fan-friggin'-tastic! I was just waiting on you. If you're okay, let's go." He let out a whoop as he rolled off her. "C'mon, I wanna find out where we landed."

He would. Marian groaned. So much for the kid's terror. This was a grand adventure to him; he was loving it. She should have known. Orlando was a survivor. Nothing fazed him. She wished she could say the same about herself.

Nimble as a monkey he scrambled to his feet and stood grinning at her. Marian stared back, feeling her eyes pop. A silly reaction really. No reason to be so surprised. He looked perfect—if they'd just flown back through time, that was.

Good grief, what am I thinking?

"Hey, you think we're near Camelot?" Orlando's eager gaze fixed on her face. "Man, I wish Nelson was here. I'd make him eat every page in that damn Yankee book." His grin faded as she continued to stare. "Whatsa matter? Oh shit, don't tell me my fly's open."

His hands flew to his crotch, froze as they landed on coarse brown wool instead of the zipper of his jeans. He looked down at himself, gave a low whistle, then studied Marian, his gaze traveling over her entire length. His expression soured.

"I like your new dress, but mine sucks." He plucked at the knee-length hooded garment he wore.

"You're not wearing a dress. That's a tunic and hose you have on. They're guy clothes, I promise." *Why* he had them on was a whole other question—one she wasn't sure she wanted answered. She took a moment to examine her own gown—long, loose and green, with scarlet ribbons at the neck, and full sleeves.

Classic medieval.

Of course. Why not?

She sighed.

Orlando coughed. "Oh, right. I knew that. I was just testing to see if you knew."

"I have a master's degree in history." Carefully, Marian pulled to her feet, the gown's fabric swirling about her legs. "I probably know more about the past than I do the present."

The present? Oh God, what if their current present really was the past? She scanned their surroundings, searching for clues. Finding only trees, brambles, and more trees. Big help.

"No kiddin'. History, huh?" Orlando looked impressed.

Marian was glad one of them was. Heaven knew her degree hadn't done her much good so far. Although she had a gloomy suspicion the studies that led up to it might come in handy soon.

Orlando thought the same thing. "So, if you know history you can figure out where we are, right?" He shot her a lopsided grin. "Or should that be *when* we are?"

Cute kid.

"Both," Marian said with a sigh. She seemed to be sighing a lot lately, but it was probably better than burying her head in her arms and shrieking, which was her only other impulse right then. "I need more to go on though. This forest could be almost any time period, and our clothes aren't much more specific. Styles changed slowly during the Middle Ages. To pinpoint exactly where and"—she sighed again—"when we are, I'll need to see a town or a village—some buildings, activity. Preferably from a distance."

Orlando squinted up at her, his dark brows pulled together. "Why 'a distance'?"

"For safety. If we really are in the"—she shivered—"the past, we can't just go barging in on people, saying, 'Hi, I'm from the future. Could you please tell me where I am and what year this is?' Number one, they probably won't be able to understand our speech, and number two—"

"They'll think we're nuts," Orlando interjected.

"Worse. They might think we're witches or demons. People of the past had a very different way of looking at things than we do. They were... Um, do you know what superstitious means?"

"Yeah. You're saying they're dumb." Orlando grinned. "So? Nuthin' different 'bout that. Most people are dumb."

Marian blinked at him. "That's pretty cynical for a twelve-year-old, don't you think?"

He blinked back. "What's 'cynical'?"

Oh hell, his attitude was probably healthier than hers. When she was his age she'd viewed most people as evil and frightening. In some ways, she still did. Her lips curled in a sad smile. "It means you're a smart boy."

"Oh. Right. Glad you noticed." Orlando glanced down, suddenly fascinated by the play of shadows on the forest floor.

Was he blushing? It was difficult to tell in the dappled light under the trees, but she'd bet money he was. What an adorable little rogue. If she hadn't felt on the verge of a nervous breakdown she would have been tempted to grab him and hug him. She squinted upward instead, searching for the sun through a webbed canopy of branches and leaves, trying to gauge the hour of the day. Late, it appeared. A dusky lavender tinged what little of the sky she could see. She rubbed her arms as a chill crept over her.

"You're right, I don't think this is the kind of place we wanna be caught in after dark. Better get moving," Orlando said, as though reading her mind—even though he'd read it wrong.

She hadn't been thinking of moving anywhere, just praying that whatever had sent them here would—*please, please, pretty please*—send them back. The hell with being caught here after dark. She didn't want to be caught here, period.

"Hey, I wonder if there are wolves in these woods," Orlando added cheerfully.

"Wolves?" Marian stiffened. Good lord, she hadn't even considered wolves. Or bears maybe?

"Don't worry, I'll protect you."

Damn the boy, he sounded like he actually *liked* the idea of wild animals.

"Wolves are just big dogs, right? I can handle dogs." Squatting down, he rummaged through the brush till he found a stout looking stick.

Not stout enough for his companion though. "What do you think you're going to do with that? Teach them to play fetch?"

"Ha-ha. Glad you still got your sense of humor." He started poking with his stick through the undergrowth, parting bushes and peering behind trees. "Must be a path 'round here somewhere," he muttered to himself.

"I wasn't trying to be funny," she grumbled.

"I know. That's why I ain't laughing." He turned back to his rooting, looking like a forest sprite in his tunic and hose.

Great, just what she needed. A smart-ass elf who was twelve going on thirty.

"Orlando—"

"*Shhh*." He cut her off with a raised hand, cocking his head and listening.

To what?

Marian strained her ears. Then she heard it, too. Distant shouts, cries, the clang of metal, a sudden crashing through the brush. The last sound close, and getting closer—

"Watch out!" Lunging forward, Orlando grabbed her about the waist, dragged her back and down. A split second later a flash of white and red broke through the trees and sailed over them where they lay panting in the mulch. The white was a small snowy horse, eyes wild, nostrils flared. The red, a young woman in a crimson gown, clinging like a limpet to the beast's saddle (whatever the heck a limpet was). She was either mad or pursued by demons to be riding so recklessly.

"Damn. Wonder what her problem is." Orlando lifted his head to stare after her. "Oh shit—" He dove back to earth, taking Marian with him as he rolled to the side just in time to avoid being trampled by a second horse—a large bay ridden by a muscular figure in leather and mail, a young man armed to the teeth with broadsword, dagger and longbow.

Marian gasped.

So did the man. "My lady!" He pulled back on the reins so abruptly his mount reared.

For several dizzy seconds Marian saw nothing but flailing hooves. She almost fainted.

Cursing, the man yanked the reins across the horse's neck and swung his weight to the side. With a loud snapping of twigs the animal swiveled and landed back on all fours, scant inches from Marian's and Orlando's heads. Speechless, they stared up at the rider, who stared back at them, his eyes wide, his breath coming heavy.

"Elaine?" He sounded as though he couldn't believe it.

Marian agreed. She didn't believe she was Elaine either. "N-no. We're... um..." Her brow furrowed. "Who *is* Elaine?"

"I think he means the chick who almost ran us down." Orlando scrambled to his feet and pointed off through the forest to where the flash of white and crimson could just be seen. "She went thataway," he told the man.

"Orlando!" Marian wanted to smack him. Whoever Elaine was, it seemed obvious she was fleeing something. What if that something was the fellow before them now?

He guessed her thoughts. "Nay, lady, I mean her no harm. I seek only to protect her from those who do." He squinted through the trees at the speck of fleeing white. "Blessed Virgin Mother—she'll kill herself!" Fear darkening his

features, he started to spur his mount forward, then halted short to gaze back at Marian. "'Tis most curious," he murmured, shaking his head.

She had no idea what he was talking about.

"Your page?" He nodded toward Orlando.

"Um, yes." She pulled to her feet and drew the boy close to her side.

"Who's he callin' a page? I ain't no book," Orlando complained, and got an elbow in the ribs for his trouble. "Ow, what was that for?" He shot Marian a wounded look. She shot him a warning glare back. "Okay, okay. Yeah, I'm her page," he agreed. "Makes me feel like a friggin' piece of paper," he added under his breath.

"Then get your lady hence, and quickly. 'Twill not be safe for her should you be discovered, or I know not my lords." With those words the man tightened his grip on the reins and charged off in pursuit of Elaine, his horse sounding like a full cavalry as it tore under branches and zigzagged between ancient oaks.

Marian gazed after him, her head spinning.

"Think he'll catch her?" Orlando said.

"I think they're both going to break their necks."

"Yeah, well ain't much we can do to stop 'em. C'mon." He tugged on her hand.

She scarcely noticed. Something else tugged at her, something strange—something that didn't fit with the other strangeness. What was it?

He tugged harder. "Marian, c'mon. We gotta get moving. It ain't safe here. You heard the man."

That's what was strange. "You're right. We did hear him. And he heard us."

"Duh. Yeah." Orlando gave her a look generally reserved for the feeble-minded.

She ignored it. "And we all understood each other." Amazing.

He dropped her hand and stared, blankly. "So? We were all talkin' English, right?"

"Wrong. You and I speak modern American English. That man's English was hundreds of years older. The two forms are very different."

Orlando shrugged. "Didn't sound too different to me."

It hadn't sounded all that different to Marian either. That's what she couldn't figure. She stared down at her gown, absently brushing it clean, and thinking. When she'd been reading Chaucer, medieval English on the page had looked like another language, but to her ears now it had sounded almost normal—just like this gown she wore felt normal. It was like all her senses had somehow been reprogrammed to match the period she was in. Could that be caused by whatever bumped her and Orlando back here? Did a person's system naturally readjust when they jumped through time?

Who the hell knew? It seemed pointless to worry about it. Just being here was bizarre enough without bothering over the details.

She looked down at Orlando, who scowled up at her. "At least that man's language told us where we are. England. Thirteenth century, I'd guess. His armor was too light for the later periods, but I don't think a longbow like he carried was introduced here until about 1200. Longbows originally came from Wales. Did you know that?"

"I do now." Orlando tapped his foot. "Can we go?"

A crackling of twigs sounded behind them. Marian gasped as heavy hands latched on to her upper arms. Her knees buckled, but the man who'd grabbed her held her upright and steered her forward through the trees.

“I *told* you we should move. Sonofabitch—” Orlando cursed as a second mailed figure hoisted him half off his feet by the back of his tunic and dragged him along in Marian’s wake. “Hey, man, don’t wrinkle the material. I just got these threads. Kinda like to keep ’em nice for a while, y’know?”

“Silence, whelp,” growled his captor.

Slipping on decaying leaves and stumbling over roots, Marian strained around long enough to see Orlando raise his hand and extend his middle finger under the fellow’s nose. Good thing the man didn’t know what the gesture meant.

Chapter 2

The soldiers shoved them out of the trees onto an open ribbon of road cut through the forest. Marian's heart lurched. Her stomach quickly followed suit. All around them clanked men in mail shirts rounding up skittish horses, wiping gore off sword and dagger blades. Very businesslike, all in a day's work. While their day's work itself—the slashed corpses of several fat friars and a skinny old woman in nun's garb—lay strewn about the forest road like so much deadwood. Already ravens gathered in the nearby branches, their beady eyes glowing like coals in the leafy shadows, their calls ringing hungry and hoarse. An evil stench of sweat and blood hung heavy in the air.

"Ew, gross," Orlando said as they were hauled across the road to a mismatched pair on the opposite side. One of the men, big and broad as a bear, paced back and forth, barking orders. The other, sleek and dark as a weasel, stood silently at ease. A sardonic grin played about his lips as he surveyed the carnage. Both turned and stared when the two prisoners were pulled to a rocky halt before them.

"Here she be, m'lords!" Marian's captor released her and stepped away. She was almost sorry to see him go, since it was largely his grip that had been holding her on her feet. She locked her knees to stay upright.

Orlando's guard let go of the boy's tunic and pushed him forward to stand beside her.

"Didn't get far, she didn't," the man reported. "Horse must have thrown her, but she seems hale."

"Indeed." The weasely man studied Marian. "She seems, also, to have changed her gown." His gaze shifted to Orlando. "And acquired a new companion. A Saracen, by the look of him. Most interesting." He turned to the bearlike figure who stood glowering alongside him. "Do you not agree, Sir Guy?"

"Sara what? I thought I was supposed to be a page. I wish you jerk-shits would make up your minds."

"Orlando—" Marian grabbed for him. Not fast enough.

Sir Guy of Gisbourne's hand lashed out, bloodying the boy's lip and knocking him into her. "Silence, Saracen! We'll have no infidel oaths here."

"All right, already. Sheesh. You want me to be a Saracen, I'll be a Saracen," Orlando grumbled. "Mind tellin' me what the hell a Saracen *is*?" he asked Marian over his shoulder.

"*Shhh*. It means he thinks you're an Arab. Just be quiet. Don't make this any worse." Her arms tightened protectively around him.

Orlando mopped the blood off his mouth with the heel of his hand. "How can it be any worse?" He glared up at the burly form of Sir Guy looming over them. "Hey, man, ain't toothbrushes been invented yet? I ain't smelled anything like your breath since the sewer line busted. Sonofabitch—"

We're dead. Who knew if the man understood all those terms? He obviously recognized an insult when he heard one. Hardly surprising. Looking and smelling like he did, he probably heard a lot. Marian squealed as Orlando was jerked out of her arms.

Sir Guy's hand arced out with a dagger. "Filthy little dog! I'll have your tongue for that—"

"No!" She lunged forward, only to be caught by an arm about her waist. *Umph*. Weasel-man was stronger than he looked.

“Gently, Gisbourne, gently. All in good time.” He deflected the dagger with a swiftly drawn sword. “Your impatience has already sailed you into treacherous waters, I fear. But happily”—he grinned—“you have me to steer you out of them.”

“Happily, Nottingham?” Sir Guy threw Orlando aside. “With you for my helmsman, good Sheriff, ’tis a wonder I’ve not yet been foundered on the rocks.”

“That *is* still a possibility. Though if you sink now ’twill be your own doing and none of mine.” The sheriff chuckled. “Poor fellow. Pay him no heed, my sweet,” he whispered in Marian’s ear. “His temper always sours in direct proportion to the increase of his debts. And he happens to be extremely indebted to me at present. Sir Guy’s luck at dice stinks worse than his breath.” With another chuckle he released her.

She stumbled back a pace, her thoughts whirling.

Nottingham? Sheriff? No! This wasn’t fair.

The sheriff sheathed his sword. “Can I trust you to stay here, my lady, whilst I speak with Sir Guy?”

Do I have a choice? Too dazed to care, she nodded.

“Good. Then we shan’t have to bind you.” Motioning Sir Guy to follow, he strode off several yards.

Orlando picked himself up out of the dirt and scurried to her side.

“Assholes,” he muttered, scowling at the two men.

Marian scarcely heard him. She gazed off into the forest, seeing it through new eyes, its power hitting her in the gut, stealing her breath. Raw primeval force. A place of shadows and secrets, green gold and pulsing in the last rays of light. Rich and vivid—more beautiful than it had been in her dreams—bigger and better than she’d ever imagined it to be.

Which made things all the worse.

“I know where we are,” she said. “Sherwood.” Her voice cracked on the word.

“Sherwood?” Orlando’s brow furrowed, then his eyes widened. A broad grin split his face. “You mean Sherwood Forest like in Robin Hood? Kew! Maybe he’ll rescue us.”

Marian winced. *No, just Sherwood.* No rescue, no hooded hero with a bow. No way. The forest was real, but its mythical outlaw was not. They couldn’t hope to find him lurking behind any of these trees. *So close, yet so far.* This was too damned ironic.

“Uh-oh. Look.” Orlando touched her arm. “If Robin’s gonna show, *now* would be a real good time.”

“What?” She turned, followed the boy’s gaze to the road. Her breath stuck in her throat. A grim-faced young soldier had just ridden in with a slender, auburn haired girl in a crimson gown slumped motionless before him in the saddle. Poor Elaine. Marian hadn’t seen her face before, couldn’t see it now. She didn’t have to. That gown was a dead giveaway. Too dead.

“Hey, that’s the guy we met before,” Orlando whispered. “And that’s—” He broke off as the man dismounted and eased his burden to the ground.

All activity stopped. A hush fell over the group as everyone stood and stared. Orlando sucked in his breath and let it out with a whoosh. He looked from Elaine’s pale face to Marian’s and back again. “Holy shit.”

Marian knew exactly how he felt. She stood rooted in place, unable to move, unable to speak, barely able to breathe. For a moment she was sure her heart had stopped. Then she felt it again, hammering against her ribs like a wild thing trying to escape.

Oh no, don't faint. She gulped in air and fought back the panic. Elaine lay only a few paces away, the crimson gown rippling around her like a puddle of blood. She couldn't bear to look, couldn't tear her eyes away.

"Too weird." Orlando touched her hand. "You and her could almost be twins."

The sheriff glanced over his shoulder at them and grinned. "An excellent idea. We shall discuss it anon." He turned back to Sir Guy. "Well?"

Sir Guy glowered down at Elaine. "What would you have me say, Nottingham? That you were right?"

"I am always right." The sheriff chuckled. "You can see for yourself now that yonder maid is *not* Lady Elaine." He flashed another grin over his shoulder at Marian.

She was beginning to hate that grin.

"Aye," Sir Guy growled. "I see." He leveled a scathing look at the young man who'd delivered the lady.

"The horse threw her, my lord. There was naught I could do." With obvious effort the soldier tore his gaze away from the body. He sounded more than sorry. He sounded devastated.

"You may spare us the details, Allan," the sheriff said, his voice both smooth and edged, a dagger voice in a silken sheath. "I only hope, for your sake, you in no way hastened the lady's demise. Hmm?"

Allan's clean-shaven cheeks flamed scarlet. "You know I did not, sire. You saw how her horse bolted. 'Tis why I gave chase—I could see she'd lost the reins. I was trying to *save* her life, not take it. I...I'm no killer of women." His gaze fell on the crumpled form of the old nun, then slanted to a thickset, pig-jowled fellow slouched a few feet away.

The piggy fellow smiled, showing two rows of rotting teeth. "'Twere self-defense, that were. Old witch pulled a dirk on me."

"But of course. I thought myself she looked the most formidable of the lady's escort." The sheriff ended the confrontation with a flick of his fingers. He turned back to Sir Guy. "Knowing Mother Jennet's staunch character, 'tis certain she would ne'er have willingly released her charge to you. She had to be... eliminated." The flick of his hand broadened to include the rest of the bodies. "They all had to be eliminated."

Sir Guy glowered down at Elaine. "Aye, Nottingham, that much was agreed at the start of this. But Elaine was not to be 'eliminated' till our marriage was sealed and her dowry mine." He kicked her frail figure in the side. "Blast the ninny wench for not sticking her saddle!"

"Tsk, tsks." The sheriff clucked his tongue. "Better to blast yourself for your temper that blinds you to our ready solution. We may have lost one bride, but providence has miraculously afforded us another." He grinned. "Your luck may be improving, Sir Guy."

All eyes turned to Marian.

She paled.

"Aw shit," Orlando said.

Marian heard him through a pounding in her head, the noise of her heart laboring to pump oxygen to her brain. *Typical, just typical.* Nothing ever changed, did it? Not even here, thousands of miles and hundreds of years away. Some people were born to be commodities, used. She was one of them.

"Marian, are these guys thinking what I think they're thinking?"

Through a gray fog she gazed at Orlando's face. A beautiful face, if boys were allowed to be called beautiful. Classic Greco-Roman features topped by thick, glossy dark curls. Eyes such a deep luminous brown they were almost black. He looked like a Byzantine angel—an angel with a heart-stopping, devil's grin.

Except he wasn't grinning now. The tension on that perfect face hit her like a slap, shocking her into action. Not action for herself—she'd looked in enough mirrors to know a lost cause when she saw one. Orlando, however, was another story. With no family but an older cousin who was never home, who couldn't be bothered with him, the boy had been surviving independently in the streets. He was everything she hadn't been. From her perch in the store she'd watched him like a caged canary admiring a young eagle. She was damned if she'd let that beautiful eagle be shot down now.

"Never mind what they're thinking," she whispered. "Just be ready to run. When they come for me, I'll try to keep them busy long enough for you to get away."

His eyes widened. "Run, hell. It's probably my fault we're here. I'm the one who was flappin' my big mouth 'bout knocks on the head sending people back through time. And *I'm* the one who got us knocked out." He paused, chewing his lip. "But I was only trying to help. You knew that, right? That jerk in the store wasn't looking for books. I saw a gun in his jacket...I think." He blew out his breath. "Shit, if I couldn't let him hurt you, I damn sure ain't gonna leave you alone with these creeps."

Marian's chest constricted. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He didn't really blame himself for this, did he? That was the most ridiculous thing she'd ever heard. Also the bravest. She wanted to shake him and hug him at the same time. She couldn't do anything for a moment but stare. A large lump filled her throat. She swallowed it down by reminding herself that she was the adult and he was the child. His safety was her responsibility, not the other way around.

"Orlando, it's all right. Honest. I don't know how we ended up here, but I know it's not your fault." He started to interrupt, but she shushed him. "No, listen. The only way you can help is to get yourself out of danger. Okay? Now, promise me you'll run the second you can." She gave him her sternest glare, the one she used to frighten shoplifters. It worked as well in Sherwood as it had in Philadelphia.

"Okay, I promise," he agreed.

Marian breathed out in relief—then almost choked when Orlando's promise was followed by that incorrigible grin of his.

"But I get to pick *which* second that is," he said.

God, he was maddening.

"Aw, come on, Marian, don't give up so easy. No one can hurt you unless you *let* them. These guys may think they're tough, but they ain't half as bad as some of the pimps and pushers I've had to deal with. We can bluff our way outta this."

She clenched her teeth. "No, we can't. I am lousy at bluffing."

Orlando snorted. "You think I don't know that? After all those books you been lettin' me steal? Don't be so dumb. You just shut up and let *me* do all the talking."

"Both of you, hold your tongues," the sheriff said over his shoulder, "or I shall have someone hold them for you." He turned back to Sir Guy. "Now then, you were saying, Gisbourne? Come, come, tell me what you have against"—his gaze slanted to Marian and back—"the Lady Elaine's fair sister."

"*Sister?*" Orlando shouted.

Marian gulped and clapped a hand over his mouth.

“What sister? ’Tis the first I’ve heard of this.” Sir Guy shot Marian a wary look. “How do you know Elaine had a sister?”

The sheriff’s brows raised. “How can you be sure she did not? Look at her, man. What more proof do you need than your own eyes? ’Tis clear she is Elaine’s twin.”

“A demon more likely, a devil sent to taunt us.” Sir Guy glanced from side to side as though expecting attack from the shadows of the trees. “This stinks of witchcraft.”

The sheriff chuckled. “Nonsense. The only stink here is yours. The boy was right, you know. You smell like a pigsty.”

Sir Guy grabbed for the hilt of his sword. “Better men than you have lost their ears for less.”

Watching, Marian held her breath.

The sheriff let out his in a harsh laugh. “Oh, please do not force me to arrest you for the murder of Elaine and her escort.” With a flick of his hand, half the company on the road flanked him, their weapons at the ready.

The other half—Sir Guy’s, Marian assumed—did nothing. Interesting. Guy of Gisbourne was not a leader who inspired loyalty in his followers. Why didn’t that surprise her?

He reluctantly let go of his sword. “Will you arrest yourself as well, Nottingham? Do you think King John will thank you for plotting to kidnap his ward? This game was not my idea. ’Twas all your doing and you know it.”

“Perhaps.” The sheriff shrugged. “But you’ll ne’er prove it.” He waved his hand in a gesture that included the entire company. “My people are devoted to me.” A grin curled his lips. “So are yours. They know who’s been providing for them. And it has not been you.”

“Elaine’s dowry would have solved that,” Sir Guy grumbled.

“And so it still shall,” the sheriff said. “’Twill be even better this way.”

Sir Guy sneered. “How so?”

“Yeah, that’s what I wanna know,” Orlando called out.

Marian clapped her hand over his mouth again.

The sheriff shot them a look. “Thank you, my lady,” he said through clenched teeth.

“You’re welcome,” she murmured, feeling greener than her gown.

“Now then, where was I?” The sheriff turned back to Sir Guy. “Ah, yes, the difficulty with our original plan, that His Majesty had promised his ward to another. Or had you forgotten?”

“That coward Hunterdon? Bah!” Sir Guy snorted. “He wanted her not. If he had, he’d not have delayed the wedding. The man’s more suited to a monastery than a marriage bed.”

“No doubt,” the sheriff conceded. “Nevertheless, he has gold enough to have bought difficulties for you should he have pressed his claim. With Elaine dead, however, he has no claim.”

“Aye, and we’ve both lost her dowry. ’Twill go to the crown now, I’ll wager.”

“You know, Gisbourne, you really should stop wagering.” The sheriff shook his head. “You’ve no talent for it. ’Tis why your coffers are empty. Without another heir, Elaine’s dowry will likely go to her cousin in Paris—out of John’s hands. Given the choice, I’d say he’d rather award it to one here than chance losing sight of it completely. Trust me, he’ll be the last to dispute our story.”

"I do not trust you. I do not trust her," Sir Guy said with a glower at Marian. "And I know not *what* story you mean."

"The story of the twins—the ones separated at birth." The sheriff sounded like he thought that was obvious.

"Twins? Separated?" Sir Guy sounded like he didn't understand a word the sheriff said.

"Aye. Twin girls. In the Holy Land, where their father fought and died. Elaine *was* born in the Holy Land, and her parents did die there—her mother in childbirth and her father in battle the same night. That much everyone knows." The sheriff folded his arms and raised one hand to rest his chin in it. He drummed his fingers against his jaw, thinking. "What is not so widely known is that Elaine had a twin. When Saracens attacked shortly after the birth, her father managed to save one babe ere he died, but Elaine's sister was carried off in retribution by a Saracen warrior who'd lost his own daughter in an English raid. He raised the child as his own till a knight who once served her father, recognized the girl and returned her to her native country with the lad who'd been her servant in the Saracen's household. What say you to that?"

"Bullshit. He just made that whole thing up," Orlando said.

"Aye." Sir Guy looked like he hated having to agree with the boy.

The sheriff chuckled, not kindly. "Well, I may have to adjust some of the details, but I think 'twill suit our purpose. We can forge a few letters for proof, pay a witness or two to add weight to the tale. You must admit, Gisbourne, it explains the evidence of our own eyes. By the saints, man, if 'tis not the truth, it ought to be! Now, take your new bride and let us be off. We tarry here over long."

Sir Guy hesitated, his expression a battleground of greed warring with fear. Marian froze as he eyed her up and down like he couldn't decide whether she was a godsend or a curse.

The sheriff clenched his jaw. "You play at caution? Now? With a cartload of bodies on our hands, and you still with a mountain of debt? To *me*, I might add. 'Tis a bit late for caution, is it not? There are times to tread softly and times to dig in your spurs and charge. And your great paradox, Gisbourne, is that you never seem to know which is which!"

Sir Guy's ruddy complexion darkened. "What I want to know is who she is—and how she came here."

"What difference does it make?" The sheriff exploded. "She could be the daughter of the devil himself! If she comes with a rich dowry, what the hell do you care? Just grab the wench and her Saracen whelp and come. We can question them at the castle, you fool. This discussion will continue better with a joint of meat and some good ale in our bellies." He snapped his fingers and the men around him began readying for departure.

"Best news I've heard all day," the soldier with the pig face grumbled. "Bleedin' saints, me gut's so empty it thinks me throat's been cut."

"That can be easily arranged," said the young man called Allan, the one who'd carried in Elaine.

Marian had almost forgotten about him. She glanced up to see him clutching his sword hilt like a cross in front of himself. His gaze met hers for a moment, then lowered while his lips moved in silent prayer. Odd man.

Beside her, Orlando tensed. Sir Guy gave up his argument with the sheriff and strode toward them, scowling. Marian winced as his fingers bit into her arm, then staggered back as the hold abruptly broke. Before she could stop him, Orlando jumped in front of her and slammed upward, the heel of his hand connecting with

Sir Guy's nose. A sickening crunch sounded and blood gushed out over the man's lips and chin.

Sir Guy roared. One hand flew to his face, the other lashed out and closed around Orlando's throat, lifting him straight off his feet. Gasping and gagging, the boy clawed at the hand holding him aloft, his legs kicking empty air.

"No! Stop it! You're choking him!" Without thinking, Marian tore into Sir Guy, pushing and pulling at him, pummeling his chest, none of it making a dent. She felt like an insect attacking an armored tank. Useless.

"Careful, Gisbourne," the sheriff warned. "She may damage herself, and we have need of her."

A light flashed in Marian's head. In one move, she snatched the dagger out of Sir Guy's belt and stumbled back, pressing the point of the blade to her own breast. A voice rang out. Hers, amazingly enough. The sound of it shocked her.

"Let him go. *Now*. Or I'll kill myself."

Everything stopped.

Sir Guy's eyes threatened to bulge out of their sockets, but his grip released. Orlando fell to the ground in a heap. Coughing, he picked himself up and scrambled to Marian's side.

"Cool move," he rasped out, rubbing his neck. "I didn't know you could bluff like that.

She shook her head. "I can't. It was no bluff."

On that thought, her legs buckled and she sat down hard in the dirt. The dagger dropped harmlessly into her lap. Gasping, she fumbled for it, only to find her hands shaking so badly she could no longer hold the hilt. It flew out of her fingers and landed several feet away. *Crap, now what?* Her gaze darted to Sir Guy, expecting to see him charging forward, but he stood still and staring where she'd left him.

Then she realized he wasn't staring at her.

"You had best release these two, my lord. Swiftly! Or I shall more swiftly release you to the devil."

The voice came from behind her. *Allan?* Marian struggled to her feet and turned to see him a few paces off, pulling taut the string of a weapon that at this range could drive arrows through armor like a knife slicing cheese. The legendary English longbow. Sometimes she really hated knowing things like that.

"Sonofabitch, I wanted Robin Hood to rescue us," Orlando muttered.

Marian groaned. No one was rescuing anyone. Allan was one man against twenty. He had to know he couldn't win. Those prayers she'd seen him uttering must have been for his own soul, his last confession. He was expecting to die. Damn it.

"For shame, Allan," the sheriff said. "What will your poor family say? They sent you to us with such high hopes you would distinguish yourself and return to them knighted. And you dishonor them by threatening your own lord. You know that if we take you alive, we shall have to give you a slow...very slow and very painful traitor's death."

"Better I be a dead 'traitor' than a live murderer," Allan bit out. "I've been full willing to fight in honest combat, but 'twould seem there is no honest combat to be found here—only bullying and thieving. And this business today is the worst. It dishonors us all." His biceps bulged as he drew the bowstring a notch tighter. "Kill me if you can, but we'll see how many of you I'll carry to Hell with me—"

He went down like a sack of over threshed grain as a stack of sweaty mail and muscle landed on him at a flick-of-the-hand signal from the sheriff.

The arrow, released just a fraction too soon, whizzed past Sir Guy's shoulder and stuck in the piggy fellow's as he lumbered forward to join the pile on top of Allan—who was thrashing like he was an entire pile of men himself.

"Man, that was dumb," Orlando said. Disgusted, he viewed the fight from beside a shell-shocked Marian. "Any fool should've knowed that asshole was just talkin' to buy time for his apes to sneak up." He kicked at a loose clod of dirt. "Where's Robin Hood when you need him, huh?"

Ouch. The name snapped Marian back to her senses. "Never mind Robin Hood. Just *run*." Grabbing the boy by his shoulders, she spun him around and shoved him to the edge of the forest.

"Whoa, wait a minute." Orlando dug in his heels. He strained over his shoulder to look at her. "You gonna run, too?"

Marian drew a deep breath. "Yes," she told him, while telling herself it was no lie. "Now go!" She watched a tense moment until he'd disappeared into the trees, and then she did run—in the opposite direction and straight for Sir Guy's dagger, which was still lying on the ground a short distance away. Somehow she had to help Allan.

The pig-faced man lurched about the road, squealing and clawing at the shaft in his shoulder. Marian dodged around him and landed by the dagger in a crouch. She grabbed its hilt and raised the blade point out in front of herself just as he tripped over the old nun's corpse and went flying. He crashed headlong into Marian, bowling her backward and pinning her flat while he gurgled, twitched, then suddenly stiffened and rolled off. The dagger went with him, wrenched out of her hands.

Struggling to her knees, she stared at the red oozing through the links of his mail. His own weight coupled with the force of his fall had driven the blade clean through his armor and deep into his heart. Her own heart twisted at the sight. So did her stomach. "*Eeuuhh...*"

I think I'm going to be sick.

"Clumsy oaf." A pair of legs moved into her view along with the voice. A toe stretched forward to nudge the body. "Fret not, my sweet, I shan't hold you responsible for this. 'Twas his own fault entirely. The man had two left feet."

Slowly, she lifted her gaze to see the sheriff peering down at her. He grinned. She felt sicker.

"I should move away from him though, if I were you. The fool also had an extraordinary number of lice. As his blood cools, they'll be seeking new territory." Chuckling, he pulled her to her feet and drew her clear of the body.

The man's touch sent chills down her spine. She twisted away and turned to see Allan, bound and gagged, being lashed belly down over a horse. He looked in one piece, at least, which was more than she could say for some of his opponents. Moans and groans filled the air.

"Gads, what a stout fighter he is. A pity we shall have to spit and roast him." The sheriff turned to Sir Guy who stood nursing his nose and supervising Allan's binding. "I know not about you, Gisbourne, but I shall be sore sorry to lose him."

Sir Guy grunted.

Marian suddenly felt like lead. "No, I'm the sorry one."

She choked back a whimper. Dear God, how had she come to this? Stuck in the past, captured by cutthroats, and a man was going to be tortured to death simply because he'd tried to help her. She was so sorry she wanted to shrivel up and blow away.

The only bright spot was knowing Orlando had escaped. What he'd do now, she had no idea. But he'd survived life in a large urban ghetto, so he could probably handle thirteenth century agrarian England.

Hell, with his skills, he'll probably end up king and turn history upside down.

"Sorry, my sweet?" The sheriff interrupted her brooding. "Why should you be sorry? Elaine's dowry will make you a wealthy woman. I shall personally speak to the king about it and arrange everything. His Highness is en route to Nottingham now, in fact. We can settle this matter in mere days. All you need do is marry Sir Guy of Gisbourne."

"Hey, man, don't make me puke. *Marian* and ol' Guy of Heartburn? *That's* why she's sorry," called a voice from the edge of the forest. "But she ain't half as sorry as you're gonna be."

Marian's heart sank as the voice's owner strode out of the trees. "Orlando, *why* did you come back?"

"Why the hell do you think?" He jerked to a halt in front of her. "Damn it, Marian, don't you *ever* do that to me again. I thought you were right behind me—nearly peed myself when I looked 'round and saw you *weren't*. It's just a lucky thing for you somebody else *was*." His frown flipped into a broad grin. "Guess who I just met."

She was afraid to.

Orlando told her anyway. "Robin Hood! Ran smack into him and some of his boys—this big dude named Little, and a little guy named Much, which makes no sense to me, but who cares, 'cause they were *real* interested when I told them what's been happening. They'll be here in a sec. I was supposed to stay hid with this fat baldhead dude in a bathrobe, but I gave him the slip and ran on ahead. I wanna see the look on old Guy's face when he gets an arrow up his tin-plate ass." He shot a wicked smirk at Sir Guy, who cursed and charged straight for him.

Ack! Marian's heart skipped several beats. *God, what a stupid bluff.* That boy's mouth would be the death of him yet. Quickly, she tried to put herself between him and Sir Guy—

Who lunged past with remarkable speed for a man of his bulk. "Out of the way!"

It took Marian several seconds to register the fact he was lunging for his horse and not her and Orlando.

"Hold, you fools! They're no demons, but men like yourselves. Stand and fight and you'll see their blood is as red as your own!" the sheriff shouted. But he was already astride his own mount, and a brittle edge underscored his voice.

The activity on the road erupted into a frenzy of yells, whinnying, pawing hooves and pounding feet. Mail clanked and scabbards slapped against thighs as men leapt into saddles and grabbed reins. The wounded groaned and cursed as they were hoisted and thrown across their mounts.

"Ouch. I'll bet that hurt," Orlando said when one of the battered was tossed too hard, overshot the mark, and landed in a heap at his feet. "Need a hand, bro?" Amiably, the boy offered him one.

The man shrieked and scrabbled backward. "Keep away, devil's imp!" Boosted by terror, he clawed his way into the saddle, swung the horse's head around, and galloped up the road on the heels of his comrades.

"Okay, be that way. See if I care," Orlando called after him. He let out a whoop and laughed. "Damn, did you see those suckers haul ass? Gotta be a record. I wish we could watch it again on instant replay."

I wish I knew what just happened. Why did they run? Marian sat down where she stood, dizzy and weak all over, her legs too shaky to hold her. Around them, the forest had gone still as a stone, an eerie, waiting silence as if the very trees held their breath. She glanced from one side to the other, expecting... What? There was nothing to see but the empty road and the trees. The men had taken everything else with them. All that remained was trampled earth and a few dark splotches in the dirt where the dead had lain. Very creepy. Weird.

"Why would they take the bodies?" she wondered aloud. Her voice echoed oddly in the shadowy stillness.

"Who knows? Probably trying to get rid of the evidence. Won't do 'em no good. Robin'll—"

"*Don't* say it." She stopped him with a look. One more mention of Robin Hood and she'd scream. That wound had been picked raw. It made no sense anyway. They wouldn't have run because of that. She shivered with a growing chill. The shadows lengthened; it would be night soon. *What now?* They were stranded in a strange time, a strange forest...no food, no shelter, no idea what to do next...and definitely no hooded hero to save the day for them. She'd always known that, but this situation proved it with a vengeance. Damn.

And what if Sir Guy or the sheriff came back? Cripes.

With a groan, she pulled to her feet. "Come on, we better get out of here while we can."

She looked up and down the road, then scanned the trees on both sides. *Which direction?* If they took to the forest, they'd be lost in no time—if they weren't eaten by wolves first. Not that they knew where they were going, in any case, but it was the principle of the thing, right? A road had to lead *somewhere*. Of course, a road also put them out in the open, at the mercy of outlaws besides Sir Guy. There were tons of outlaws in these times. The blasted woods were probably crawling with them—even if none of them were Robin Hood. Darn shame, that.

Oh, hell, now she was doing it. *Why* couldn't she get Robin out of her head?

Because he's stuck in your heart, that's why. Because he's always fascinated you. Because when you were little you needed a hero and you thought being named Marian gave you some kind of personal claim on him. Stupid girl.

And, on top of everything else, because she'd somehow gotten herself stuck in the Middle Ages, in *Sherwood Forest*, of all times and places to be. Which had to be the most warped joke of anytime, anywhere. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Get over it, Maid Marian!

She gave herself a mental slap, drew a deep breath, and looked around again. Okay, which way? *Choose*. Forest or road? God, she hated making decisions. She hated not understanding why the men ran, too. It was like they knew something she didn't. She hated not knowing things most of all.

A sudden thought struck her. Not a pleasant one. What if...

"Orlando?" She turned to see him standing in the middle of the road, gazing off into the mist-shrouded trees. Expecting someone? *Oh, joy*. On shaky legs she walked over to him.

He glanced up at her approach. "Whatsa matter? You look worried."

Worried? She was having visions of them both being ravished and killed by a band of Sherwood outlaws who could be lurking nearby this very moment. "Worried" barely scratched the surface.

The real outlaws had hardly been like Robin's mythical merrie men. In fact, "merrie" was probably the last thing any of them were. A brutal, bloodthirsty bunch, medieval criminals. They had to be with the penalties for crimes so harsh in this era.

Once a man broke the law, he had little left to lose. Those who escaped capture lived like animals in the woods, doing anything to survive. If there *were* outlaws close by, ones who knew they were here, who watched them even now...

Her stomach knotted as she stared Orlando in the eye. "Just tell me one thing. When you ran off before...um, you didn't really meet anyone, did you?" She held her breath.

"Nope."

Her breath whooshed out in relief. Thank God. He *had* been bluffing. Which still didn't explain why Sir Guy's company bolted, but she'd work on that question later. One problem at a time. With a last look around, she made her decision. They'd follow the road, in the opposite direction the men took, but stick to the shadows of the trees. That would give them a little cover. Maybe. Hell, it would be full dark soon and no one would be able to see a damn thing anyway.

"Okay then, let's get moving." She grabbed Orlando's hand and pulled him to the edge of the forest.

He pulled back. "Hang on. We can't go anywhere yet."

"Why not?"

"Because they'll be here any sec. We gotta wait for them."

"Who's 'them'?" She wanted to shake him. "You just said you didn't meet anyone."

"That's right. Not *anyone*. Robin Hood and his men."

A shriek sounded. Marian's.

"Orlando, there *is* no Robin Hood."

"Bullshit. There is, too. He *told* me who he was. Who do you think chased off Sheriff Sleazeball? You saw what happened. They heard he was coming, and hauled ass." Orlando paused, his brows pulled together. "Huh. Maybe I shouldn't have warned them. I didn't realize what a badass reputation he's got. He must be cooler even than he is in the movies."

Marian clenched her teeth to keep from screaming again. Things were becoming too surrealistic. She closed her eyes and counted to ten, then rested her hands on his shoulders and leaned forward. "Orlando, listen to me. Whatever those men were running from, it was *not* because of anything you said."

He blinked and stared past her. "You might be right about that."

"I know I'm right. And you did *not* meet anyone who told you he was Robin Hood. There's a good chance no one around here even knows who Robin Hood *is*. The earliest known legends about him haven't been written yet. Do you get what I'm saying? He's not a real person."

"Does he know that?"

"He doesn't *know* anything. Robin is just a myth, a folktale, a literary invention. Understand? Historians have been researching him for years. I've researched him myself." God, how she'd researched him. "But I've never found any solid evidence he really existed—not now, not ever." *Only in my dreams*. She drew a deep breath.

"Yeah? Well maybe you just never looked for him in the right place."

Marian stepped back and planted her hands on her hips. "And where would you suggest looking for him, Mr. Know-It-All?"

Orlando grinned. "Right behind you."

What?

She spun about—froze.

"Shit," she heard someone say. Herself. Surprising. It wasn't a word she often used, but she couldn't think of a better one just then. She couldn't think at all.

The woods were moving, shadows detaching from shadows. Weird shapes materialized in the mists between the trees, figures on two legs, crowned with antlers and horns. Some wore leaves, some feathers, some fur. One had a wolf's head, one a bear's. And one...

Her legs went weak. She knew him—the tall one who stood in a tunic of forest green, his bow in hand, his face hidden behind the folds of a deep hood.

A dream, just a dream...

He stepped toward her.

Marian forgot how to breathe. Dizziness swamped her. She swayed, locked her legs to keep from falling—crumpled anyway.

The hooded man caught her, just as he had a thousand times before.

Chapter 3

Safe in Robin's arms. Sheer bliss. Such a pity it couldn't last. But then, it never did.

The second she saw him, Marian forgot all else, knew she was dreaming. She'd had this dream too many times before. It was always the same. She'd find herself deep in Sherwood, captured by the Sheriff of Nottingham. Dreadful man. How she got there, what he wanted with her, she never knew. It hardly mattered. She was Maid Marian, the outlaw's lady. That was reason enough.

She'd be frightened, but never for long, because Robin always rescued her. She never saw his face. She didn't need to. She knew him by his voice, his touch, his scent—by his effect on her. Other men left her cold. Robin set her on fire. He'd sweep her into his arms and carry her off into the trees where they'd make love—*real love*—and live happily for the rest of their lives. Or until she awoke.

Knowing that waking couldn't be far off, Marian groaned. She leaned into his embrace, laid her head on his chest, and fastened her arms about his waist, determined to hang on for as long as she could. His arms tightened in response. *Yes*. She wanted him to hold her close—the closer the better.

"Easy, my lady, easy," a voice whispered out of his hood. A voice she loved, never more than a murmur, but husky and warm. A voice that set her skin to tingling.

"You're safe now," he said.

Big news. His arms were the only place she ever felt safe.

"But we mustn't tarry here. Can you walk?"

Not if she could avoid it. She hid a pout against his chest. He was supposed to carry her, darn it. It was how the dream went.

"I...I'm too dizzy." Well, she was. A little peculiar, that, to feel so dizzy in a dream. Not that she was complaining.

"No matter. My legs can carry us both." He shifted his grip on her and swung her high against his chest.

She snuggled in, resting her head on his shoulder, wrapping her arms around his neck. She felt like purring. "Yes, I know. You've carried me before."

"I have?"

"Mmm-hmm, lots of times. Thousands. Maybe even millions."

"Indeed. Lucky me." He settled her more securely in his arms. Not a twig snapped under his feet as he carried her off the road and into the greenwood.

Nestled against him, the only sounds she heard were the steady beating of his heart and the quiet rasp of her own breath. She buried her face in his tunic and inhaled. Mmm, he smelled of wood smoke and fresh-cut herbs, spicy and sweet, with just a hint of something magical, mysterious. Moonlight perhaps? Did moonlight have a fragrance? Who cared. It was luscious, whatever it was. A warm woodsy scent, uniquely Robin.

She smiled. "I love you."

"You do?" He faltered in mid-step.

Why did he sound so surprised? Silly Robin.

"Of course. And you love me." *Wait a minute...* Had he ever told her he loved her? She couldn't remember. It was one of those things she'd always taken for granted. "You do love me...don't you?"

The muscles in his arms and chest tensed. "I adore you... I just didn't realize you felt the same."

He didn't? How strange. "I'm Maid Marian. Who else would I love but Robin Hood?"

"Hmm, who indeed?"

A fresh wave of dizziness hit, forcing her to cling to him tighter. "At least in my dreams I'm Maid Marian. In real life, it's just plain old Marian."

"There is nothing plain about you, my lady."

Hah, he had no idea.

"You wouldn't say things like that if you knew me out of my dreams." She didn't realize she'd spoken the thought aloud until she heard him inhale sharply.

"Um...are you dreaming now?"

"I must be if you're here."

"Ah. I see. Very logical."

Logical? Who was this, Robin Hood or Mr. Spock? She lifted her head from his shoulder to look at his face, found it still lost in the dark of his hood so she couldn't see a darn thing. Stupid of her to even try really. She should have known better. She wondered how he saw anything from under there himself, wondered how much longer before she awoke. An uneasiness pricked her. Was there something else she should be wondering...worrying about? Someone?

She couldn't remember. Everything blurred around her. *So dizzy...*

Robin shifted her in his arms to hold her closer, and she gave up thinking. What the hell, so long as the dream lasted she could handle some dizziness, right? Sighing, she shut her eyes and reburied her face in his shoulder.

When she looked up again, they'd entered a small clearing. Across it a ghostly white mount waited beneath the trees, its legs half hidden in the evening vapors rising from the forest floor. Feathery wisps of steam curled out its nostrils, increasing the spectral illusion, heightening her sense of surrealism.

"About bloody time you got here." The call came from a fair-haired, bearded man in a red-feathered cap, with a lute slung over his back. He stood in the deepening shadows, holding the ghost horse's bridle, staring curiously at Marian.

She stared back.

With a wink and a grin, he doffed his cap and swept a small bow before her. Her face flushed.

"Be needing some help?" the fellow offered, looking hopeful.

Robin's arms tightened around her. "Dream on, Will Scarlet. I'd as soon ask a wolf to help me guard a lamb."

"Hey, I'm the one who's dreaming," Marian said.

Will's brows quirked up as he shot her a glance, then he raised his eyes to peer into Robin's hood. He cleared his throat. "*Ahem...* all right is she?"

"She's a bit fuddled it seems. No great wonder considering all she's suffered today." Robin heaved a small sigh.

"Ahh," Will said. "Sir Guy the Gross and old Notty, you mean."

"That and...other things. 'Tis all bound to take a toll, if not sooner than later." In two easy motions Robin lifted Marian into the saddle, then swung up behind her.

She leaned against him and winced when the back of her head met with the ridge of his collarbone. Her hand explored the sore spot. "Ow. How did I get this lump?"

"A bump is it?" Will handed Robin the reins. "Poor lass. I'd be pleased to kiss it and make it better."

Robin pulled the horse around so its hindquarters stood directly in Will's face. "Kiss this instead, why don't you?" he said, and trotted them off.

Will's laughter followed them into the trees.

Cheeky fellow, wasn't he?

"One of your 'Merrie Men,' I suppose," Marian said.

"If he gets any 'merrier' he'll find himself missing some teeth." Robin slowed the horse to a walk. "In truth, my lady, the man's a...traveling minstrel...for the moment. He's but recently arrived in Sherwood. My men tried to rob him a fortnight ago, and we've not been able to rid ourselves of him since. He claims to be wandering the land in search of a wife. I suspect anyone's wife will do."

He clucked to his horse and turned its head a fraction to the side. Like magic a secret trail materialized before them. The night shadows closed in, and the forest swallowed them up.

Marian stared about, trying to pierce the gloom. *So still and dark.* Nothing around her but the sounds of the horse, the whispering leaves...and Robin. Surrendering to it all she settled back to enjoy the ride. A new experience. There'd never been a horse in the dream before. She'd never been on a horse before, waking or dreaming. She liked the motion of the animal, the feel of it under her thighs.

She liked even better the feel of Robin's arm around her, his masculine torso supporting her back. Snuggling closer she wrapped both arms over his at her waist, turning her face so her cheek nestled in the hollow of his throat. He lowered his chin and rested it on top of her head. *Perfect.* Now they fit in the saddle like two spoons nestled in a drawer.

The motion of the horse rocked their hips together, her back to his front. *Mmm, what would happen if...* She experimented with arching her back so her buttocks ground into his groin. Something twitched and hardened behind her.

Robin sucked in his breath and released it in a groan. "If you keep that up we may never get where we're going."

That was a problem? She arched again and felt the hardness lengthen and grow. "You know what? If you keep *that* up, I won't care if we don't."

Good lord, did that come out of *her* mouth? Never would she act this way with anyone else—she'd slit her wrists first. But Robin wasn't anyone. He was the only one. And this was *her* dream, darn it.

Make the most of it while it lasts.

Using the rhythm of the horse as a guide she pressed her hips against him again. And again...

He made a strangling noise in his throat and pulled back on the reins. "Whoa, Marian, whooooa..."

Whoa? He was ordering her to stop like she was a horse? The heck with that.

As they came to a halt she realized he *was* talking to the horse. She frowned. "You named your horse Marian?"

Why?

"Um...yes. After you. Do you mind?"

Oh my... How could she mind anything when his voice touched her like silk? Feeling warm flutters inside she leaned forward to stroke the mare's neck. "Actually, I think it's sweet."

With both hands Robin pulled her back and lowered his head to hers, his breath tickling her ear. "'Tis you who are sweet, my maid." His lips grazed her cheek, a touch tender as new leaves, as timelessly sensual as the forest around them.

It was all she needed to tip her over the edge. A delicious heat spread through her. Her nipples hardened. She went damp between the legs. "Well, if that's the way you feel, let's forget the ride and do 'sweet' things to each other in the

bushes.” She twisted around and latched onto his shoulders, intent on finding the lips in that hood and kissing them.

Robin grabbed her wrists, holding her off. “No, wait—”

“I can’t wait. Who knows how long we have? I could wake up any second.” The thought drove her straining toward him.

His hands tightened on her. “No, we can’t do this—not now—you don’t understand—”

“What’s to understand?” She grappled with him, trying to pull free. The movement sent a fresh wave of dizziness crashing over her, leaving giddiness in its wake. “I’m just having a wonderful dream is all. Let me enjoy it while I can.”

“Lady...” A desperate edge sharpened his voice. “You are *not* dreaming. This is *real*.”

God, if only that were true. It wasn’t, but it was nice of him to take her fantasies so seriously, especially since he was the main part of them. She demonstrated her appreciation by leaning in against his hold and rubbing her body against his.

Robin groaned. “Marian—”

On hearing her name, the mare nickered and stared over her shoulder at them, coyly batting her big brown eyes.

“He doesn’t mean you, dear. He’s talking to me,” Marian the human told her. “Why don’t you take a long walk and come back for us later. Find some grass to nibble on or something.”

Her namesake snorted and bobbed her head up and down, pawing the earth, then suddenly—

Wow, just like the Lone Ranger. Hiho, Marian!

“Bloody hell—” Robin grabbed for the reins as the mare reared high. Too late. He toppled backward and landed with a grunt on the ground. “*Oof*.”

“Oh!” Maid Marian landed face-first flat on top of him.

Both lay panting as their transport disappeared down the path.

“Thank you,” Marian called after her.

“Wench.” Robin rolled them over, pinning her beneath him. “Are you happy now?” His whisper reverberated in the darkness.

Marian peered into the shadows of his hood, trying to guess where his mouth was. “I’ll be happier when you kiss me. How about it?”

He made a noise between a groan and a growl.

Was that a yes or a no?

She felt his breath on her face. *So close...* Her arms snaked around his neck and pulled him closer.

“Never mind, I’ll kiss you instead,” she said, and joined him in his hood. Her mouth found his on the first try.

He tensed, jerked back—then caved in completely, pressed her hard into the ground.

Lips parted. Limbs tangled. Time stopped.

Electric. The kiss struck her like lightning, burned clear through to her core, sliced her open and left her quivering, bleeding, dying for more. Hot need pulsed deep inside, a hungry ache between her thighs—

“Lady...please...” Robin pulled back, panting.

No, no, no—don’t stop! She grabbed his hood with both hands, yanked him down and dove straight back in. Her mouth plundered his, licking, nipping, sucking...

A crazy woman. Crazy for Robin. *Mmmm...* She wanted to eat him alive.

He stiffened against her, his whole body rigid—one part of him especially. A steel rod dug into her abdomen.

Robin groaned, dragged his lips away from her. “Marian...” His breath came ragged. “We have to stop this... Now... There’s something I have to tell you —”

“Later. I’m busy now.” She locked her legs behind his knees when he tried to push away. One hand pulled him back by his hood, the other raked down his back...made a marvelous discovery.

“You’re not wearing anything under your tunic,” she murmured against his mouth.

A shudder racked through him as her hand touched his buttocks. “My apologies,” he choked out. “I had...no time for the niceties of braes or hose today.”

“I’m not complaining. I don’t seem to be wearing any panties either.” She’d just noticed that, in fact. How historically accurate. And how convenient. “Want to see?”

“No!”

Too bad.

She stroked his bare flesh. Smooth, warm, firm... Goodness, he had a great ass. She dug in her fingers and squeezed—then gasped as he bucked free from her legs and heaved back. Clinging to his hood she went with him. He landed on his great ass. She landed on her stomach with her face in his lap.

Oh my. He had a great erection, too.

Marian let go of one head to examine another. She lifted his tunic and stared at the shadowy monster hiding beneath. Her eyes went wide in the darkness. Good God, he was huge. Had he ever been this big before? Her breath hitched. How had she fit him inside? She had a flicker of panic wondering if he’d fit now.

Oy... Only one way to find out. Trembling but determined, she rose to her knees and hoisted her gown.

“W-wait!” Robin’s voice cracked. “What are you doing?”

Stupid question.

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Wriggling forward, she advanced on him.

“Oh no—” There was a frantic crunching of twigs as he scrambled to his feet.

Marian’s hand shot out and closed around his shaft. “Oh yes.”

“Arrgggh!”

Why did he sound like he was strangling? She wasn’t tugging that hard. “This is *my* dream, and if I say we make love, we make love, damn it. Use it or lose it, big boy.”

“Will you *please* listen to me— *Uhhh.*” His rump reconnected with earth as he lost the tug-of-war. “This is no dream,” he finished weakly.

“How the heck would you know? You’re part of it. Now shut up and sit still. I don’t know what you’re so worried about. You’ve got the easy part.” Without loosening her hold on his erection, she braced her free hand on his shoulder and climbed aboard his lap, straddling him. His breath rasped out as she positioned him at her opening and locked her legs around his waist.

“*Easy?*” He grabbed onto her hips.

Marian couldn’t tell if he was trying to push her away or pull her closer. Perhaps he couldn’t decide either.

“Lady, you are making this most hard for me.”

“Good. It’s supposed to be hard. There’s not much we can do with it otherwise.” She rubbed against the length of his shaft, making him slick with her own juices.

Robin let out a low guttural growl. His hands tightened on her. “Marian, for the love of God—”

“No, for the love of *you*.” Before he could stop her she lifted up, then pressed down, driving him all the way into herself with one hot, heavy thrust. They both gasped as her muscles contracted around him.

O Lord have mercy... Robin was right, this was no dream, she wasn’t asleep. She must be dead, because this was heaven.

With another gasp, she lifted again. He met her this time, pushed up as she came down. In wordless agreement they moved together in a dance older than time, more natural than breathing. The rhythm of waves kissing shore, sky hugging earth. The ebb and flow of life itself. With each thrust he sank deeper, filled her more—pulsing, pounding, throbbing, swelling—until there was nothing left inside her but Robin. Only Robin. Loving Robin, she exploded into sparks.

She felt his arms tight around her as they collapsed back onto the forest floor, the world suddenly spinning, the woods receding into fog.

“You know what you’ve done, don’t you?” he whispered. “You’ve made yourself mine forever. I’ll never let you go now.”

The words fell on deaf ears. The dream had already dissolved into dark.

Light pricking her eyelids. A hard cold surface at her back. A colder ache in her heart.

Marian knew the reason for all three. She’d fallen asleep with the lights on again, sleepwalked her way out of the bedroom again, and been dreaming of Robin Hood.

Again.

The first was rough on her electric bill, the second rough on her health, and the third... The third was just plain rough. More than rough. That damn dream was destroying her sanity. Not that she didn’t have plenty of other problems to make her crazy, but she kept hoping she could get past her other neurosis—eventually—if she could just get past the one in the hood who smelled like herbal shampoo.

Which raised an interesting question all by itself—the idea that she could smell him at all. Dreams didn’t usually have scents, did they? None of her other dreams did—when she had other dreams, which wasn’t often. Mr. Moonlight-and-Magic monopolized her sleep time. He was there almost every night. And it was so damn depressing waking up alone. Like now.

Marian groaned, put her hands over her eyes, tried to pretend he was still lying beside her. Or had he been under her this time? Already the dream had faded into the back alleys of her mind. She could barely remember it, except for the beginning. How weird. Usually, it was the parts with Robin she recalled, with everything else a fuzzy blur. This time Robin was the blur and...

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter, concentrating, replaying the details one by one. Hmm, this time she remembered the sheriff, the capture—even what brought her to Sherwood in the first place.

Time-travel? With little Orlando? Where on earth did her subconscious dig up that that scenario? Maybe she should tell the kid, just to give him a laugh. He might get a kick out of it. Then again, he’d probably think she was nuts.

And I'd have to agree with him.

She let out a deep sigh.

Marian, this proves it, your brain is dissolving. Get up and go to bed while you can still move, you idiot. Sheesh, what a headache she had. Her skull felt ready to split open.

"Uhh, I think I'm getting a migraine," she muttered aloud.

With a grunt she heaved onto her side. She was almost afraid to open her eyes and see where she'd ended up. The last time she'd sleepwalked she'd awoken in the back of her closet; the time before, scrunched into the cubbyhole under the kitchen sink, with water dripping on her. Yuck. It was always some close, confined space, as though she'd been trying to hide. Why, she had no idea. Or, rather, she did know; she just didn't like thinking about it.

Okay, that's enough.

"To bed—now!" she ordered herself. Her voice rang out shrill and sharp. *Ouch.* The noise did nothing to help her headache.

A throaty rumble sounded nearby. That didn't help either.

A snore? Marian's eyes popped open. Her heart stopped.

"Oh. My. God." She was still dreaming, right? She must be.

There in front of her loomed a blocky gray stone manor house. She was lying in a circle of torchlight before its massive wood door. A few feet to the side of the door, propping up the wall, slouched a bleary-eyed sentry—the source of the snore. It looked like he'd been dozing at his post and only just come to his senses.

Marian wished she hadn't come to hers. Holding her breath she blinked up at him. He pulled away from the wall and peered over her head into the darkness outside the circle of light.

"Who goes there?" he barked.

His voice brought an answering chorus of barks from inside, behind the great door. Real barks. Terrific.

She girded her loins and hauled to her feet, dusted off her gown—the green one, she noticed morbidly.

The man's gaze landed on her. His eyes opened wide. He snapped to attention. "Lady Elaine!"

Oh no, not again.

Chapter 4

“Nooooo...”

A blood-curdling shriek split through Hunterdon Manor.

“’Tis monstrous! I’ll not bear it—not bear it, I tell you!”

Lady Cymrica was not having a good night. The rushes on the floor scattered in all directions as she stormed about the great hall in a full-blown frenzy of grief. Several brindled hounds hurried to vacate her path, their ears pressed flat, tails between their legs. Firelight glinted off her saffron gown and raven black braids as she flung out her arms and wailed like a banshee. Her cries echoed high in the rafters.

“I’ll kill myself! I’ll drink poison! I’ll jump in the well and drown!”

“I’ll join you,” Marian muttered under her breath. She wasn’t having a good night either. Eyes lowered, she stared down into her wine cup, winced when Cymrica rattled the rafters again.

“*Aaahh*, Allan my sweet, my heart, my only love! If they kill him, I shall hurl myself from the tower!”

“Nonsense. You will do nothing of the sort. Do sit down, *cherie*. Hush. You are disturbing the dogs.”

The order came from a white wimpled, russet gowned woman seated by the hall’s central hearth. Lady Isolde, the previous earl’s widowed sister-in-law. Very plump, very French, and nearly out of patience with her Saxon niece’s hysterics.

“Such a goose you are being, *ma petite*. If he dies, I am sorry for it, but we could never have let you wed him in any case,” she scolded.

The indisputable logic of that prompted a fresh wave of wails from Cymrica. “I know, I know—’tis too cruel!” She clutched at her bosom as though stabbed. “Pray do not be harsh with me, dear aunt. Tonight I am the most miserable of maidens.” Collapsing to her knees, she buried her face in Isolde’s well-cushioned lap and sobbed long, loud and bitterly.

Isolde rolled her eyes and patted the girl’s sleek hair, tutting and clucking like a bored hen. One of the hounds by the hearth lifted his head and howled in harmony.

Marian knew exactly how the poor creature felt. This was no dream but a horribly bad feudal soap opera—with herself one of the star players, appropriately costumed in an elaborate blue silk gown they’d given her for the occasion. How long had she been here? One hour? Two? She’d lost track of the time. Minutes crept by like snails. Father Boniface had been summoned, but Father Boniface was temporarily indisposed—a chronic occurrence apparently. He had a delicate constitution, she’d been informed. Like she was supposed to *care*? Good grief, he could take all night as far as she was concerned.

Seated in a far corner between a large, gargoyle-faced nurse named Godgifu, and the steward of the manor, an elderly knight called Sigurd who seemed able to sleep through anything, she could have enjoyed a good howl herself if the earl’s younger sister had not been doing enough of that for both of them. To even things out, Marian was drinking enough for two. It seemed only fitting since half the Hunterdon household still thought she was Elaine. The other half favored the “lost twin” theory. Unable to think of a better story to explain her presence, she’d told the one the sheriff concocted. A ridiculous story, but safer than the truth, she’d figured. Stupid her.

The Hunterdons had been debating the issue ever since. Several fistfights had broken out over it, in fact. As near as Marian could tell, the “lost twin” faction just liked the romance of the tale. The “Elaine” side—the pragmatists—claimed she knew not what she said, that the ordeal with Sir Guy had been too much for her, that she was hysterical.

They weren’t far wrong.

She downed the rest of her wine in two big gulps—one for poor Elaine, one for poor her—held out the goblet for more. An obliging young page refilled it. *Nice boy*. Marian managed a small smile of thanks for him. He smiled back, which made her think of Orlando, which turned her smile to a worried frown.

Where *was* Orlando? She wasn’t exactly in a position to go looking for him, and she hadn’t seen him since passing out on the road. She must have passed out, of course. Her last clear memory was Sir Guy and company beating a hasty retreat into the twilight while dizziness swamped her. The next thing she knew it was full night and she was lying in front of this manor. She must have found her own way here. The manor wasn’t far from where they’d been, she’d discovered from Sir Sigurd. If she and Orlando had walked a few hundred yards up the road they’d have spotted its tower.

I passed out, Orlando left me there to look for help, and while he was gone I sleepwalked here.

The explanation was barely plausible, but the only alternatives she could think of were impossible. So impossible they made the fact she was stuck in thirteenth century England seem quite sane by comparison. Hard, cold, miserably sane.

Stuck in thirteenth century England and responsible for the agonies of a man who was possibly being tortured to death this very moment. She couldn’t blame Cymrica for wailing one blessed bit. She drained her goblet, gestured for more.

Got it. *Very nice*. She was beginning to really like that page.

Nurse Godgifu shot her a disapproving glare.

You, I can do without. Marian ignored the woman and took another drink.

Stuck in thirteenth century England and mistaken for a dead girl—or her lost twin, depending on to whom you spoke. Not that she could blame anyone for that either. Given the resemblance, it was only natural, right?

Right. I’ll drink to that. She raised the goblet, gulped in, swallowed down.

Godgifu clucked indignantly.

Shut up, you old bat.

Stuck in thirteenth century England. *Merrie Olde England*, during the reign of King John—when things were anything but merrie. Mistaken for a dead girl—or her sister—and expected to marry that girl’s betrothed. Marry?

More wine.

Yep, she was supposed to marry Lord Roland, Earl of Hunterdon. Marry him tonight.

Tonight! Good God, there wasn’t enough wine in the world.

She gripped the goblet till her knuckles turned white, took a deep breath and fought back the panic.

Why the rush? According to what she’d learned from the garrulous Sir Sigurd before he’d mumbled himself to sleep, Roland had already postponed the wedding three times in as many years. And always on the same pretext, that he couldn’t spare the time from his studies. He was something of a scholar, this enigmatic earl. His family worried their lord would go blind from all the reading and writing he did locked away in that musty closet of his.

They worried more he'd never produce the desired heir. There was little Stacey (short for Eustacia, her mother's name), Roland's twelve-year-old daughter. He'd been married once before, but his wife died giving birth to the girl—a thought that sent chills down Marian's spine since she was expected to be the next broodmare. Stacey was currently with the sisters of some neighboring abbey, and seemed destined for the church—according to Sigurd at least, who saw no other reason for a girl being educated.

“Why else would she need so much learning?” he'd wanted to know, scratching his head. Then he'd explained that what Stacey really needed were brothers. A wealth of information was good old Sigurd. As one of the few Saxon families who'd managed to hold onto their lands despite the “thieving Normans,” Sir Sigurd considered it doubly important the Hunterdons protect their rights and property with plenty of sons. He was extremely relieved Lord Roland was finally doing his duty.

“Bloody well took him long enough,” the knight had mumbled right before his mumbles segued into snores.

Oh, yes, it was bloody wonderful, just peachy keen. But Marian didn't think duty had a damn thing to do with it. The real reason for the rush was another “D” word. Dowry. Whoever Roland believed her to be, the attempted kidnapping today had obviously spurred him into action. From his perspective either she was Elaine, who had almost been stolen from him and could be so again unless he finally sealed their union, or she was someone who looked enough like Elaine to have a chance at her dowry. Either way she was worth money. Hah. Wasn't that just par for the course?

Marian stared at the goblet in her hands. Gold, encrusted with jewels. Must be worth a fortune. The Hunterdons had wealth, she'd grant them that. But there was an addictive quality to wealth, wasn't there? The more people had, the more they wanted. Marian knew all about addictions.

Clutching the cup in a futile effort to keep her hands from shaking, she glanced across the hall and studied the bridegroom through her lashes by the flickering light of hearth and candles. Seated there with his close-trimmed black hair and clean-shaven face, his solemn brown velvet robe spilling about his ankles and an open book on his lap, Lord Roland looked every inch the scholar his family accused him of being.

Tall, lithe as a dancer, dark as the devil, he looked no more like Sir Guy than a falcon resembled a grizzly bear. Yet the two were cut from the same cloth, she decided—both predators, both shameless opportunists, both only too willing to substitute one bride for another. In fact, Roland was the worse. For Sir Guy had had the sheriff orchestrating things and egging him on. Roland acted on his own.

And I don't give a damn. The wine had finally done its job, and old training did the rest. Her eyelids drooped, her pulse slowed. Cotton filled her head, apathy her soul. A thick, familiar lethargy settled over her like a cloak. The defense mechanism she'd perfected as a child, an almost catatonic trance that never really dulled the pain, but at least made it seem less important.

Aw, come on, Marian, don't give up so easy. No one can hurt you unless you let them.

A voice? It stung her like a slap. Her eyes snapped open. She jerked alert.
Orlando?

Her gaze swept over the tapestry hung hall. She half expected to see him come striding out of the shadows. But the voice had been in her head, just an audio memory called forth by some quirk of the subconscious. The only footsteps coming

toward her were the catlike tread of Lord Roland. Several paces behind him waited a wizened little man in priest's robes. Father Boniface? Whoopee. The old priest looked remarkably blissful, as though his long vigil in the privy had resulted in some deeply satisfying spiritual insight. At least someone felt happy.

Roland looked like his patience had run out ages ago and was being held in check only by the thinnest threads of courtly protocol. No longer the quiet scholar, he seemed like a jungle beast ready to pounce. His dark eyes glittered down at her out of a face almost too handsome to be real. Ruthlessly handsome. He looked more like some imperious eastern emperor than a Saxon earl. By comparison with their stocky, fair-haired kinsmen, he and his sister Cymrica looked like a couple of exotic blooms growing in a field of common daisies.

"They favor their grandmother," Sigurd had whispered earlier. "She was a Byzantine princess the old earl rescued from shameful straights in Constantinople. 'The Black Rose,' they called her. 'Twas said Lord Cymric abandoned a caravan load of riches in order to bring her home posthaste, and ne'er regretted one penny of the price."

"Lady? You will accompany me, please?"

Roland spoke the request gently, but Marian wasn't fooled. An autocratic command if ever she'd heard one. She glanced at the hand he held out to her—sensitive and long fingered, a poet's hand—then quickly lowered her eyes, gripping her goblet so tightly its contents quivered and splashed burgundy red drops onto her lap. They stood out boldly against the pale blue of her gown. She stared at the spots, unblinking. For some reason they fascinated her. Maybe because they looked so much like blood.

"There now, see what ye've done?" Scowling, Godgifu pried the goblet out of Marian's frozen fingers and set it aside. "'Twill stain, that will, and this be Lady Cymrica's best gown."

Roland's expression tightened. "Cymrica has more gowns than the queen herself. But if 'twill soothe your sense of loss, good nurse, I shall buy her a new gown to replace this one. In fact..." His gaze slanted to his sister who was still crumpled before Isolde, sobbing hysterically. "I shall buy her *two* new gowns *if* she will cease howling long enough for me to be wed with some small degree of peace."

Cymrica twisted around and glared at him. "I want not a new gown! I want nothing from *you*." She scrambled to her feet and stood backlit by the blaze of the great central hearth, looking like some fiery avenging angel. "If you were half a man, you'd not be thinking marriage now. You'd be attacking Gisbourne and demanding Allan's release! If not for his sake, for your own honor! The swine tried to steal your bride, didn't he?" She shot a hateful look at that bride, letting everyone know whom she blamed for Allan's plight—a sentiment Marian couldn't help but share.

Roland's ebony brows arched upward. "Me? Riding about the countryside at this time of night? In the damp air? Really, Cymrica, you know how easily I take chill."

"'Chill' is it? Is that your newest word for *cowardice*?" With a haughty sniff the girl spun about and stormed down the hall to a far door. "Well, if you'll not do anything about it, *I* will!" Sounding like a thunderclap, the door crashed shut.

Roland groaned. "God's ribs, she's headed for the armory."

Isolde sighed. "*Oui*, my lord. She has her father's temper, that one. You should be thinking marriage for her as well as yourself. A strong husband is what she needs, one who will not be afraid to beat the stubbornness out of her."

"I've been looking, believe me," Roland said. "But I've not yet found any man I dislike enough to inflict her upon."

"Ah well..." Isolde rose to her feet, took an unhurried moment to adjust her wimple and smooth her heavy brocade gown. "I fear you must excuse me from attending your wedding. I had best see if I can talk some sense into the silly child. Otherwise we shall have to lock her in her chamber again. A pretty thing that would be for your marriage bed, no? She would be screaming all night. None of us would sleep."

Her ample figure swished languidly to the door Cymrica had slammed. She pushed it open, then paused to flash a sly grin over her plump shoulder. "Not that you will be sleeping much this night, in any case, eh, *mon chere*?"

With a ripple of laughter, she disappeared into the gloom beyond the door.

Marian swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. Next to her, grumbling and fussing, grim-faced old Godgifu hauled her bulk up off the bench and made to follow.

"Stay, nurse. Your duty here is not finished."

Her master's curt command halted her in mid-step, though not without some effort on her part. With a sharp-eyed glance at both him and Marian, Godgifu grudgingly reclaimed her seat.

"Sigurd? Sir Sigurd!" Roland nudged the steward awake with the pointed toe of his shoe.

It looked like the dictatorial eastern emperor had completely pushed aside the quiet Saxon scholar. A pity, because Marian had been hanging onto the slim hope she might yet be able to reason with the latter.

"Hie you to the stables and tell that rascal Dirk to keep a close guard," Roland ordered. "If he allows Lady Cymrica even to glimpse a mount tonight, I'll have the hide off his back."

Sir Sigurd chuckled. "In one of her battle-maid moods, is she? The old blood runs strong in that lass. She's a true Hunterdon, she is."

He chuckled again, ignoring the warning look in his lord's eyes.

"When you have finished with that," Roland carefully enunciated each syllable, "you may inform our battle-maid herself that I shall look into the matter of Allan on the morrow. If the fellow is indeed facing harsh punishment, a few coins in the right palms may at least buy him a speedier death."

"Aye, 'tis about all we can do, I suppose." The old knight sighed, ruefully scratching his head. His eyes met Marian's and whatever he saw there made him feel an explanation was in order. "Mind you, m'lady, there be nay fondness 'twixt the Hunterdons and Gisbournes, and Sir Guy's actions this day have given us grave insult, but the lout has the favor of the sheriff, and together their forces outnumber ours."

"Meaning that a direct assault would prove nothing but our own idiocy," Roland cut in crisply. "There are other ways of handling these matters."

The sudden hooding of his eyes offered Marian an ominous clue as to what one of those other ways might be. Her chest tightened.

"Aye," Sigurd agreed. "Like the wedding and bedding of your bride afore that Norman swine gets another chance at her!" He snorted his approval, then turned beet red beneath his earl's blistering black-eyed glare. He coughed. "*Ahem*... right...the stables. I'll see to it now."

He bobbed a hasty bow and retreated as fast as his old limbs would carry him.

"One wonders what that tongue of his is connected to these days. Not his brain certainly." Roland's hooded gaze followed the steward out before returning to Marian. "My apologies for his impudence, lady, but his point was well, if crudely, spoken. 'Tis not safe for you to remain unwed."

Her face flushed. "Are you saying this marriage is for *my* good?" *What a hypocrite.*

He had the cheek to actually grin—a small one, just a slight curling at the corners of his lips, but a definite grin. It deepened Marian's blush. The tightness in her chest increased.

"Oh, 'tis possible I may get some good out of it as well. But 'tis your good that concerns me most."

Yeah, she'd heard that one before. Her eyes narrowed.

His grin disappeared. "You do not know Gisbourne and the sheriff as I do, my lady. Whoever you are, you will be in danger from them till securely wed." He gave her a long, appraising look. She flushed hotter under it. "But if it eases your mind, I have decided to accept your story. Your face is very like Elaine's, but your manner is very much your own. Therefore I am willing to wed you as *Marian*, if that be your wish."

He had a voice like crushed velvet—husky soft, deep, rich—an elegant diction warmed by a deadly sensual purr. The sound of her name in that voice sent an odd flutter through her. She shivered, but not from cold. This was a very dangerous man. She didn't want to marry him, period.

"My *wish* is to be left alone. If you believe I'm not Elaine and still insist on this marriage, you're as bad as Sir Guy."

His brows lifted. "I think not. All he wants is Elaine's dowry. I am happy to forego that if needed, and take you as is."

Bullfeathers. Medieval marriages didn't work that way, not among the upper classes. They were based on money and politics. No one in their right mind gave up a dowry, and definitely not happily. He was lying. On top of which he was being a jerk. What else would you call a man who married another mere hours after his intended had been murdered? So, okay, she could think of some other terms for him, but they weren't ones she generally used. Although she was fast nearing the point where she would.

More wine. That's what I need.

Quickly, she reached for her cup.

Quicker, Godgifu moved it out of range.

Rats. Marian shot her an I-hate-you look.

The old woman didn't seem to care.

She wouldn't, the hag. Marian switched her look to Roland, who didn't seem to care either. *Arrgh...*

"For God's sake, *why*?" She tried not to sound as desperate as she felt.

She failed.

His lips curled in that maddening grin. "For *your* sake, my lady." He answered as though he thought that was obvious. And also as though he thought that particular phrasing might mean something to her.

The odd thing was, it did. Except she didn't know what—only that a weird prickle ran through her, and she suddenly felt like she'd forgotten something. Something important? Her brow wrinkled. She struggled to remember. Drew a blank. Decided it made no difference. She had bigger things to worry about, one of them six feet tall with the attitude of a cat tormenting a mouse. And she was the mouse.

He leaned close and she let out an involuntary squeak. Good grief, she even sounded like a mouse. Marian clapped her hand over her mouth.

Roland stared down, his grin fading into the tiniest of frowns, a narrowing of eyes and lips, a tensing of the jaw. "We will marry because you are in speedy need of sanctuary, and marriage is the surest way I can provide it," he explained calmly, logically. "Because if I had married Elaine as planned, very likely she would still be alive. And..." He drew a deep breath, let it out in a sigh. "Because I'll not have your death on my conscience as well."

Marian sighed, too. "How noble."

She didn't dare meet his eyes. She focused instead on the blood red drops on her gown and wondered at a curious sensation stirring within her, wondered what to call it, because she'd rarely experienced it before. She felt his gaze burning into her, felt her face heating again. Her stomach knotted, her thoughts raced.

All right, maybe she'd judged him too harshly about Elaine. He did sound genuinely sorry about the poor girl. *But that doesn't excuse what he's trying to do to me.*

If he really wanted to protect her, he could do it without marriage, and he knew it. All he had to do was stick her in a convent. Wasn't that what most medieval noblemen did with their troublesome women? She'd *like* being cloistered, darn it. Calm, quiet life...time to study, read, write... No men. It was perfect for someone like her. It would certainly be safer than here—from her perspective anyway. He just wanted that damn dowry. She hoped like hell King John refused to give it to him.

"Noble or not, it operates in your favor. You should be honored. I am giving you my house, my name, and my protection in exchange for the simple matter of a son or two." He extended both hands to her. "Now come."

Awfully sure of himself, wasn't he? Marian suddenly recognized her feeling. Her heart began hammering. She glanced once at Roland's hands—to let him know she saw them—then deliberately clasped her own hands together on her lap.

Rebellion. That's what she felt—inside and out. Rebellion against him, and against her own quiet nature. It was a long overdue digging-in-of-heels inspired by Orlando's words, or maybe just the thought of free-flying Orlando himself.

Holding the boy's image in her mind like a beacon, she cleared her throat and said, "Um, no, I don't want to."

"No?" Roland appeared not to understand the word. "Lady, we are wasting time. Father Boniface awaits. We had best make use of him before the...ah, the necessary claims his attention once more. He had eels for supper and they don't agree with him."

"Fine. Father Boniface can live in the necessary for all I care. He can move into it lock, stock and barrel." She kept her gaze lowered and clasped her hands tighter, held on to herself for dear life. "We don't need Father Boniface because I'm not going to marry you. I said *no*."

A sharp sigh hissed out above her—impatient, exasperated, the sigh of a man in no mood to argue. Which was good, Marian thought, because she had no intention of arguing either.

"Ah," Roland said, "I see. And am I to assume that this is your final word on the subject?"

Damn straight. She took a deep breath to steady her voice. "You assume correctly."

"So be it." His robes swished as he turned away. "Nurse Godgifu," he called over his shoulder, "'twould be unseemly of me to lay hands on the lady before we

are wed. I leave it in your charge to see that she reaches the chapel in good speed.
Try not to handle her too roughly.”

Chapter 5

She will...

It sounded like a death sentence. Worse. Marian's ears still rang with the words.

She will...

Father Boniface never should have accepted it, but the old priest obviously knew which side his bread was buttered on.

She will... She will...

She had, anyway. And digging in her heels hadn't helped one blessed bit. Godgifu had pushed her straight to the door of the chapel like she'd been on greased skids. So much for rebellion. All her protests fell on deaf ears. The ceremony was short and to the point—the abridged version apparently, made up in honor of the occasion.

Roland kept waving his hand at the priest and saying, "We can dispense with that part. Move on."

Marian wasn't sure why her own presence had even been needed. When they got to the vows, Roland answered hers before she could open her mouth and scream.

"She will," he'd said. Just like that. "She will."

"No, I won't!" she'd hollered. Too late. Father Boniface had already declared them wed.

"You may kiss your wife, my son."

"We can dispense with that part," Marian had choked out. Fortunately, Roland hadn't pressed the issue, had even allowed her to leave the scene of the crime under her own power, with some small degree of dignity. Unfortunately, she'd been escorted to his bedchamber immediately thereafter. There was nothing dignified about her position now.

Huddled naked under the covers of a massive canopied bed, hidden behind tapestry bed curtains, she listened to Roland enter the room and dismiss a giggling young woman named Solemnia of all things. She was Isolde's personal attendant, but until they could find her a chamberer of her own, Marian would be sharing her. Earl's ladies had to be attended, of course; there was no escaping it. The giggles were grating, but the only alternative would have meant sharing Godgifu with Cymrica, and Marian had had enough of Nurse Godzilla for one night.

There sounded low, masculine murmurs as a stocky, fair-haired youth called Hodge performed the same services for Roland that Mistress Giggles had just completed for her. The boy looked a tad dull-witted, but obviously devoted to his lord. Marian supposed someone had to be. Through a crack in the bed curtains she watched him laboriously smooth the creases out of the brown robe, then fold and lay it in a carved oak chest. She couldn't see what the robe's owner was doing and didn't want to. She focused on Hodge instead, tried to use his slow plodding movements to lull her into lethargy, tried to detach, go numb. Tried to not care.

Failed miserably.

She did care, damn it—always had, always would. But it was no use. She couldn't stop what was coming. She'd been taught too early to lie still and take it, that fighting only made things worse. Old training died hard.

A shudder racked through her. Tears filled her eyes as the memories filled her head. Feeling like an open wound, she lay there shivering and waiting, hating her weakness. Wouldn't Orlando be disgusted if he could see her like this.

Wherever he was right now, she felt like she was letting him down, knew she was letting herself down. Knew even better there wasn't a thing in hell she could do about it. There never had been. Self-defense was a grand concept, but there wasn't much a little girl could do against a grown man.

Swallowed up in the big bed, Marian felt like a little girl again, felt filthy inside, helpless all over. A long, hard, brutally strange day, with the recent rebellion such a ridiculous flop, she couldn't think what else to try, could hardly think at all. Wouldn't think. She'd just hope that Roland would be fast, and that she wouldn't disgrace herself anymore than necessary. She had a little pride left. Not much, but some—a tiny ragged shred. She'd cling to that.

The chamber door clicked shut with Hodge's departure. Marian blinked back the tears, braced herself. *No crying, no begging, no struggling. No response, period. Don't give him the satisfaction.* She'd just grit her teeth and concentrate on surviving this connubial farce as best she could. Afterward...

She squeezed her eyes shut. Afterward, maybe she could escape into sleep, if he'd let her. And dream, if she was lucky. God, how she'd need a good dream tonight. Her dream. She needed Robin now more than ever.

The swish of the bed curtains being drawn back brought her eyes flying open. She found herself staring at a taut-muscled male torso that rippled like molten copper in the soft glow of the bedside candle. Her breath hitched. He looked like a Greek statue, utterly motionless, shocking in his physical perfection. Then the candle was snuffed and he was only a moonlit silhouette with a rich velvet voice.

"You are on my side of the bed."

Huh? She blinked. Was that supposed to be funny?

"I need the side closest to the door," he explained, "in case, ah, a crisis should arise during the night."

Oh. As far as Marian was concerned this night was already a crisis, but she wasn't about to argue the point. After that single shattering glimpse of him she doubted she could make a sound anyway. Doubted, too, that simply gritting her teeth would get her through the coming ordeal. He'd looked dangerous enough dressed. Naked, he looked lethal. Her breath snagging in her throat, she rolled to the far side of the four-poster, in her haste dragging most of the covers with her.

Without comment Roland slid into bed and methodically hauled everything back into place. Blankets, sheet...and Marian, her fingernails clawing at the mattress the whole way. She ended on her side, trapped in the curve of his body, her back to his front. His arms wrapped around her middle, his thighs pressed up behind hers, and only a few folds of the sheet stood between her and the dreaded inevitable. She felt his heart beating into her spine, his skin hot and smooth against hers. Her body tensed. Suddenly she couldn't stop shivering.

The arms around her tightened. "Lady, you are trembling."

Perceptive, wasn't he? Why did he sound so surprised?

"Is the room too cold for you?"

Actually, it was starting to feel like an oven, but she was damned if she'd tell him that.

"You are...nervous perhaps?"

Hah. Guess again.

"Frightened?"

Try terrified.

"Not of me, surely?"

Is there anyone else here?

His breath released in a small sigh. "I think there are a few things we had best discuss."

Marian bit her tongue to keep from strangling on it. She'd been braced for sexual assault, not conversation. This was absolutely depraved.

"I don't want to talk. If you're going to rape me, I'd prefer that we get it over with as quickly as possible, if you don't mind."

With an agonized groan Roland heaved away from her onto his back. "God's blood, lady, what kind of a monster do you think I am?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

"No, I suppose I don't." Throwing back the covers, he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "And I fear anything else I might say or do this night would but lower me further in your esteem."

Marian yanked the covers back up to her chin. "Not really. You're already about as low as you can get."

"Indeed." Without warning he turned and captured her face between his hands. "Since I've nothing to lose then, I'll be damned if I'll not even get a kiss for my trouble."

She stiffened. Sudden panic locked her lips tight against the expected invasion. His mouth pressed down warm and soft on her brow instead. Then he was out of the bed, back into his robe, and striding for the door.

"Rest you well, my lady. No one shall disturb you tonight. You have my word on it." The door closed quietly behind him.

Marian lay stunned, eyes wide, staring into the darkness, all the wind sucked out of her sails by his departure. *He's gone?* She strained her ears, listening for his return even while knowing he wouldn't. He'd given his word. Why she should believe him, she had no idea, but she did. He could have forced himself on her so easily. She'd expected it, expected the worst. Yet he'd left her with no more than a kiss.

On the forehead.

Good lord.

He'd left her alone! *Why?* Because he didn't want her to think badly of him? Because he'd realized she was frightened? Why on earth should he care about that? No one else ever had. Even worse, why should she care that he did?

A sharp smack broke the silence of the room—Marian slapping herself in the head. Why the hell was she lying here like an idiot when she finally had a chance to escape? If she wanted out, *now* was the time to run.

There was just one slight problem.

"I don't know where to escape to. Or how." Her voice sounded small in the shadows. With another groan she sat up in the center of the bed, feeling dwarfed by its size and the magnitude of her own predicament.

Something creaked. Either her brain was cracking from the strain, or the door was opening.

Marian's breath released in what was almost a sigh of relief. *Roland.* He'd returned, had he? And here she'd been worrying that she might actually be starting to like him. *Hah.* Well, it saved her the trouble of trying to decide what to do next. On with the wedding night frolics. Bastard.

Her faith in his rottenness restored, she sank back into the pillows and waited, listened to him padding across the floor...heard the lid of the oak chest squeak open...heard the rustle of fabrics...metallic clinks...

Coins?

The lid dropped shut again with a hollow thud and she could no longer stand the suspense. What was he doing? Counting his money? *Now?*

Suddenly more irritated than frightened, Marian scooted to the edge of the mattress and peeked out through a crack in the bed curtains. Her eyes widened. Moonlight filtered in through the window, illuminating the chest and the figure crouched in profile before it, dark curls peeking out the rim of his tunic's hood. The scene overlapped in her mind with the image of a boy in a bookstore, stealing paperbacks out of a bin. Same pose, same boy, same basic activity. Too shocked to speak, she watched him stuff a leather pouch down the front of his tunic, rise, and tiptoe to the door.

"Orlando?" she finally managed to rasp out.

Her whisper coincided with the sound of the door shutting.

He was gone.

Damn.

Marian flew out of bed and fumbled for clothes. Her undergarment, a white shift, lay neatly on a carved stool. She yanked it over her head, not knowing if she put it on frontward or backward, not caring. Slippers and stockings lay beneath the stool. She skipped the stockings and shoved her feet into the shoes. The blue silk gown was nowhere to be seen. Off for cleaning? Fine. She hated that gown—bad memories—but she needed something besides the shift. She spied the green gown she'd arrived in hanging on a hook in the corner. It had some unsettling memories attached to it, too, but she scrambled into it, regardless, then darted out the door.

Groping her way through the dark outer chamber, she nearly stumbled over Hodge asleep on a pallet by the exit to the courtyard stairs. He grunted as her foot bumped him. Marian caught her breath, froze in mid-step.

Hodge rolled groggily to his side and was snoring again in seconds. No problems with insomnia for that boy. She released the breath she'd been holding, pushed open the door, and stared down into the moonlit courtyard with its scattered shrubs and benches, its cobbled well...

And not a soul in sight.

Her skin prickled into gooseflesh. What the heck was going on? She *had* just seen Orlando, hadn't she? But he couldn't know she was here, too, or he wouldn't have been—her stomach turned over—robbing the Earl of Hunterdon, for heaven's sake. How did he get into the house? How did he know where to look for loot? She'd known the kid was resourceful, but not *this* resourceful.

A hundred questions tumbled through her mind. Half of her thrilled at the knowledge he was all right; the rest teetered on the edge of panic wondering how long he'd stay that way. Lord have mercy, he hadn't wasted any time, had he? Just what was he up to? Who had he gotten himself involved with? Someone put him up to this—some outlaw—she was sure of it. A medieval band of thieves would probably love to have a clever kid they could slip through windows and such. Did Orlando have any idea how harshly crimes were punished in this era?

Crap. She had to find him before he got himself captured and killed.

As she stood shivering and staring, debating what to do, a flash of movement caught her eye. A boyish figure in hose and hooded tunic slipped out of the shadows at the base of the stairs and hurried across the courtyard in a semi-crouch.

The little imp.

Like a silent shot, Marian was down the stairs and after him. She didn't dare call out for fear of waking the household. Racing diagonally to cut him off, she came within reach as he rounded the yard's central well. A forward lunge—a grab—

and she had him.

Yes!

Or maybe no. Too late she realized the boy she'd caught was taller than Orlando. When straight he was a bit taller than she. As they stumbled to a halt his hood flew back and two raven dark braids tumbled out.

"Cymrica!" Marian let go as though burnt. "What are you doing here?"

Furious, the girl whirled to confront her. "I might ask you the same thing. Looking for Roland? What a pity. My brother seems well finished with *you* this night. I watched him ride out a short while hence. He'll be petting his little Tabby cat by now." Her lips curled in contempt. "So much for his fear of a night chill."

Marian felt a suspicious chill of her own. "A cat?"

"Aye. A two-legged one." Cymrica grinned like a cat herself. "The widow Tabitha. Her cottage lies in the forest." The girl's eyes glittered in the moonlight as she glared down her nose at Marian. "You'd best accustom yourself to sleeping alone. Your lord spends most nights in that trollop's bed. She's been his whore for years. I'm sorry to be the one to tell you."

I'll just bet you are.

Marian forced a smile onto her lips. "That's his business, not mine."

This was hardly disturbing news. It might have been nice to think Roland's earlier gesture had been pure gallantry, but she'd never really believed it was. And the truth of the situation certainly took part of the pressure off her. Didn't it?

"I'm glad he has someone else," she said, while telling herself she honestly meant it. "I never wanted to marry him to begin with—in case you didn't notice. I don't want to be here at all."

"Truly?" The concept seemed a perplexing one to Cymrica. She wrinkled her brow in thought. Her eyes narrowed, then suddenly opened wide. "'Tis good! Then you'll not mind going to Sir Guy's instead, will you?"

Before Marian could draw breath enough to gasp, she was spun round, with Cymrica's left hand buried in her hair and a dagger pricking her throat.

"One sound, *sister*, and I'll slit you where you stand."

Oh, honestly... The "sister" bit back a surge of hysterical laughter. Poor Cymrica was an amateur at this; she couldn't know how ridiculous she sounded to someone who'd been threatened by pros.

"If you're planning on delivering me to Sir Guy, what makes you think I wouldn't prefer to just be killed right now?" A strangled gulp sounded behind Marian and she knew her point had hit home. To anyone familiar with Guy of Gisbourne, the logic was, of course, irrefutable.

The gulps became muffled sobs, the dagger dropped, and Marian was released as quickly as she'd been captured. Turning with a sigh, she stared at Cymrica who sat crumpled in a dejected heap on the ground, mopping at her tears with the hem of her knee-length wool tunic.

"I should be horsewhipped." The girl's gaze lifted to Marian's, her eyes large and dark, overflowing with despair. "Forgive me. I did not truly wish to harm you. 'Tis just that I am so...so d-d-desperate to save Allan!" she moaned. "I...I'd planned on bribing the guards to release him to me. But my purse may not be heavy enough. Roland rarely gives me money of mine own. So I thought mayhap 'twould be better to..." Her eyes lowered in shame. "To bribe Gisbourne himself."

"By trading him me for Allan?"

The teary gaze flashed up again. "'Twould not have been for long. Roland would have ransomed you back swiftly, I am sure."

Oh, really? Where the enigmatic Earl of Hunterdon was concerned, Marian doubted one could be sure of anything. Besides...

"If I'm already m-married"—she tried not to choke on the word—"why would Sir Guy want me?"

Slowly Cymrica pulled to her feet, moving like a weary old woman instead of an active eighteen-year-old. She sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "You are right. 'Twas a foolish plan."

Marian stood without speaking a long moment, her eyes closed in concentration, trying to see some reason to not do what she was about to. But all she could see was Allan's bruised face as they'd lashed him on his horse like a beast being carted off to slaughter. And only because he'd tried to help her.

"Yes, foolish. Very foolish," she agreed, not sure if she was referring to Allan, Cymrica, or herself. All three probably. Her eyes opened and she met Cymrica's hopeless stare. "But it's still the best plan we have."

They didn't have to tell Sir Guy she was married.

The sniffles stopped. Cymrica's gaze locked onto Marian's. "You...you'd do that for me?"

"No. Frankly, Cymrica, I'm not even sure I like you. I'm doing it for Allan, of course."

"Why?" The girl's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Are you in love with him?"

What? Jealous little twit, wasn't she? Marian just looked at her. They didn't have time for stupid games. "Don't be ridiculous. I feel responsible is all. It's my fault he's in trouble. I owe it to him to help if I can."

"Oh." Cymrica chewed on that, her brow wrinkling anew. "That's what I thought, too," she muttered, seemingly to herself. "But I ne're thought a weak little poppet like Elaine would feel the same."

She peered at Marian as though seeing her for the first time. Slowly her lips curled into a small smile. "You are not Elaine, are you."

It was a statement, not a question.

To Marian, it was simply a relief. She answered Cymrica's smile with a tiny, tired one of her own. "No, I'm not."

"So Elaine did have a sister? You *are* her twin?"

Marian's smile faded. She was no good at subterfuge was what she was. "No, not that either. But please don't ask who I really am. It would take too long to explain, and..." She sighed. "You wouldn't understand it. I don't understand it myself."

She turned away to stand by the well, rested her hands on the cool stone rim, and stared down into its inky dark depths, trying not to think. She didn't bother to glance up when Cymrica moved to join her.

Without preamble the girl reached out and placed her hand over Marian's on the rim. "I know who you are. You're *my* sister now, and I already like you far better than I like most people—certainly better than I liked Elaine. I'm glad you're here, howe'er it came to be."

Marian heaved another sigh. It probably made no difference—with what lay ahead, she doubted she'd live much longer anyway—but between Roland not forcing the wedding night issue, regardless of his reasons, and Cymrica's easy acceptance of her, these Hunterdons were making it very difficult for her to continue hating them. Damn it.

Cymrica's fingers closed warmly around hers and squeezed.

Unable to stop herself, Marian squeezed back.

* * *

Several minutes and one stealthy escape from the manor later found them still holding hands as they darted through a patchwork of moonlight and shadows toward the stables. Cymrica had a grip like iron and ran a steady course, pulling Marian, protesting, along in her wake.

“Cymrica, I can’t ride! I’ve never even been on a horse before... I don’t think.” Marian suddenly wasn’t sure about that. An odd half-memory tickled the back of her brain, too fuzzy to get a grip on. She pushed it aside as Cymrica pulled her onward. “Why don’t we walk?”

“We *need* horses. ’Tis simple, you’ll see. I’ll give you my old pony—a child could manage him. Hurry.” She quickened her pace. “I told you, ’tis too far to walk. And too dangerous. What if we’re beset by thieves on the way? How will we escape without mounts?”

Hell, everything they were planning was dangerous. What did a few thieves matter? Marian made another futile attempt to jerk free. “And I told you, your stableman won’t give us any. Roland sent orders he’d have him whipped if he does. What if the man tells? You’re going to get us caught before we begin.”

“Hah!” Cymrica snorted. “Roland’s too lily-livered to have anyone beaten. All our people know that. His threats are useless. *Mine* are not.”

Chapter 6

“Did you have to hit him so hard?” Marian grumbled. Handling a horse was less daunting than she’d expected, but poor Dirk. She tightened her grip on the reins of the gray pony he’d saddled for her after Cymrica blackened his eye. And poor her. The pony’s name was Featherfoot, but there was nothing feathery about him that she could tell. Rocky would have been a better name, judging by his gait. Her kidneys would ne’er be the same.

“Pish-posh.” Cymrica slowed her elegant roan mare, Aster, to let Marian and Featherfoot catch up as they trotted down the forest road, sticking to the cover of the trees along its side. “’Twas but a tap—nothing to people of his sort.”

Meaning peasants and serfs, Marian assumed—who would, naturally, be viewed as little better than animals by members of Cymrica’s class. She gritted her teeth and let the matter drop. There was no point in blaming Cymrica for being a product of her times. The girl was flaunting convention enough as it was by daring to love a man beneath her station. As the youngest son of a lesser Welsh noble, Allan had no lands or title of his own, and no hope of any beyond what he could win for himself.

“He’ll wed me as soon as may be, I know he will,” Cymrica said, returning to their previous topic of conversation. “After he’s knighted. He’ll not always be poor.”

“Not if you marry him, he won’t,” Marian muttered under her breath. An unkind comment, she knew, but bouncing on Featherfoot this past mile had soured her mood, which had been none too sweet to begin with.

“Once Allan earns his spurs,” Cymrica continued as though there was no doubt he would earn them, “he can enter jousts and tournaments. There is much wealth to be won that way.”

“To the victors go the spoils,” Marian quoted glumly. “Yes, I know how jousts and tournaments work.” What she didn’t know was what she and Cymrica would do once they reached Sir Guy’s. “This might not work, you know. What’s to stop Sir Guy from keeping me and killing Allan?” A pity she hadn’t stopped to consider that sooner.

“His honor?” Cymrica offered hopefully.

As though in response, Featherfoot snorted. Marian was inclined to agree with him. “Does Sir Guy have any honor?”

Cymrica sighed. “None that I’ve e’er heard of. Perhaps we’d best try bribing the guards, after all.”

“I thought you said your purse wasn’t heavy enough for that. How much did you steal from Roland tonight anyway?”

“*Steal?*” Cymrica reined up so sharply, Featherfoot bumped into her mount’s flanks. The mare turned her head and shot Marian and the pony a disgruntled look in the moonlight. “I’ve ne’er stolen from anyone, least of all my own brother. What are you talking about?”

Marian was no longer sure. When she’d caught Cymrica in the courtyard, she’d assumed it was her she saw pilfering Roland’s trunk. Now she was back to square one. It had been Orlando. Great, just great.

Cymrica waited for an answer, squinting suspiciously from under the shadows of her hood.

“Never mind. I, um...made a mistake.” Marian shifted uncomfortably in the saddle. Featherfoot took it as a sign to continue forward, for which she was most

grateful. "Why don't you tell me more about Allan?" She might be a lousy liar, but she could darn well change the subject.

"I know no more. Only that I love him, and I am sure he loves me. We have...shared looks."

"Shared looks?" Meaning that Cymrica had never actually met him? Good lord, what a marvelously medieval courtship.

"We've ne'er spoken," the girl explained. "But I've seen him well nigh a score of times. Thrice at the market in Nottingham, and often at the abbey when Aunt Isolde and I go there to visit Stacey."

"Stacey?" Marian felt like she was turning into an echo.

"Yes, my niece, Roland's daughter."

Oh, that was right. Sir Sigurd had said something about her being educated by nuns.

"Elaine lived at the abbey, too, though she was the king's ward. The sisters raised her after her parents died."

Probably safer for her than living at court, if the history books were correct about King John and his eye for the ladies. Marian supposed she'd better keep that thought to herself.

"What brought Allan to the abbey?" she asked instead.

"The abbess is his aunt, so Elaine told me."

Marian suddenly felt sick. "Mother Jennet?"

"Yes," Cymrica said, a smile evident in her voice. She'd either missed part of the story Marian had told about the adventures on the road, or forgotten the grislier bits. And Marian had neither the heart nor the stomach just then to remind her. "Elaine said he was most dutiful in paying his respects to the reverend mother. Though I am sure he did it to see me as well. Why else did his visits so often match my own, hmmm?"

"I see your point," Marian said, seeing also the mental image of an old nun lying in the dust like a broken doll.

Either something in her tone jarred Cymrica's memory, or the girl read her thoughts.

"Oh no." Her whisper sounded like a ghost in the darkness. "I've been so frightened for Allan, I've scarce considered the rest. I forgot. I'm so sorry."

She glanced over her shoulder at Marian. "It must have been horrible for you and... Oh, my poor Allan—to lose his aunt so cruelly! And Elaine..." Her voice cracked. "I did not like her over much, yet..." She choked back a sob. "Yet I would not have wished her such an evil end. I'm sorry I called her a weak little poppet—even though she was. I...I..." The sobs would no longer be held at bay.

Marian stared in horror as Cymrica slumped over her mount's neck, the girl's whole body shaking as the mare speeded her step in response to her rider's forward thrust of weight. Remembering the scene at the manor, she could only imagine what was coming next. The forest would soon be bursting with banshee wails. *Spit*. How the hell could she get Featherfoot to close the gap between them? Pulling back on the reins slowed him—she'd figured out that. Almost anything slowed him, in fact. But nothing seemed to make him go faster.

Damn, damn, damn.

"Cymrica? Please don't cry. *Pleeese*, not now." Vainly she stretched out her arm, and almost fell out of the saddle when the girl abruptly ceased sobbing and pulled up in front of her, causing Featherfoot to slam on the brakes, too. He was so good about stopping, that pony was.

"The bloody bastard," Lady Cymrica cursed, sounding little like a lady. She glared furiously to the side, her eyes glinting in the moonlight.

Marian followed her line of vision to see additional light spilling out in a single beam across the road ahead, its source the window of a tiny cottage nestled back between the trees. A woman's laughter rippled out from the dollhouse dwelling along with a husky masculine murmur. The man's words were muffled, but his voice was unmistakable. Roland. Marian didn't need anyone to tell her who the woman was. But Cymrica informed her nonetheless.

"Tabitha." She spat out the name like poison. She turned toward Marian, her expression livid, her eyes brimming afresh. "I...I am sorry for what I said before about Roland...and *her*. 'Twas monstrous of him to leave you. And on your wedding night, too, the beast! If he were *my* husband, I...I'd..."

"*Shhh*, they might hear you." Marian was amazed how brittle her own voice sounded. One would think she was upset or something, when nothing could be further from the truth, of course. The only thing that upset her about Roland was having been forced to marry him in the first place. She told herself she didn't care what else he did, or with whom, if it gave him reason to leave her alone. She even tried to believe it. "Let's get out of here."

For heaven's sake, a man's life was in danger and they were wasting time. She tugged on the reins, trying to turn Featherfoot away. The pony stood like a lump. Marian felt like crying, and had no idea why. "How the hell do you steer this thing?"

Cymrica stared at her a moment, then tapped Aster with her heels, maneuvering the mare across the road and forward. The pony blew out a soft snort and plodded after them.

"If he tries that again, kick him," Cymrica whispered over her shoulder. "Just remember, he'll do exactly as he pleases unless you make him behave."

Somehow Marian got the impression she was talking about more than horses.

The road ran straight for the last leg of the journey, broadening as the forest gave way to fields. They sighted the Gisbourne stronghold, looming massive into the night sky, the moment they left the trees. They smelled it not long after. High stone walls and towers rising out of the ground, looking like an earthquake couldn't raze them, the whole complex surrounded by a moat that doubled as the castle's cesspool, judging by the stench. Overhead hung a fat full moon, bright enough to cast shadows, bathing everything in a cold white glow.

Marian stared down at the stagnant water as they skirted its edge, saw several dead rats bobbing about like corks among other objects she couldn't identify and didn't want to. *Ewww*. "We're not going to have to swim this, are we?"

"God forbid," Cymrica said nasally. She held the reins with one hand while pinching her nostrils closed between the thumb and forefinger of the other. "There's a foot bridge at the back. We'll present ourselves at the postern gate. The guard there can announce our arrival."

"I'll be surprised if we haven't been announced already. They must have a watch posted." Marian tilted back her head to study the top of the great bailey wall, thought she saw figures lurking behind the parapets. "Are those sentries?" She pointed.

Cymrica didn't bother to look. "Most likely. But they'll do naught. I doubt we appear much of a threat." She flashed Marian a wry grin.

Marian couldn't grin back. Her eyes widened in horror at sight of the footbridge, such as it was. A rotting, sagging plank laid haphazardly across the moat, looking ready to topple in at the first stiff breeze. Besides, it was already in use. A family of rats scurried across it.

"Cymrica, we can't cross *this*."

"You'd rather swim?"

A rhetorical question obviously. No need to answer.

Cymrica pulled up the mare, dismounted, and tethered her to a nearby tree, which had possibly been planted for just that purpose. God knew it was a sick looking tree and seemed not much good for anything else, poor thing.

In a dozen fluid strides the girl was across the plank and waving at Marian from the other side. "Wait there, if you like. I'll meet with Sir Guy alone. If he agrees to our terms, I'll come back for you."

"Um...what if he doesn't agree?"

"Then crossing the moat will be the least of our worries."

Without another word Cymrica turned and bounded up an incline to the postern gate. She unsheathed a dagger from her belt and rapped its hilt on the wood, a series of sharp staccato taps, echoing in the night.

Slowly, with an eerie creaking of hinges, the heavy gate swung inward. Cymrica poked her head in, then stepped through the portal and disappeared into the darkness beyond. The gate hung open behind her, swinging to and fro, its timbers groaning like a lost soul.

Weird. Why hadn't the guard shut it? Had there even been a guard? Marian hadn't heard Cymrica speak to anyone. Yet the gate opened. *Very weird*. A chill crept down her spine, a sudden sense of being watched. She twisted around in the saddle, stared in all directions. Saw no one, nothing but the empty moonlit field, the dark brooding fortress, and the filthy moat. But still her skin prickled, like bugs crawled over her.

Suddenly, the plank bridge looked pretty good. With a scramble of aching limbs she half slid, half fell off the pony, and tied him to the tree next to the mare the way she'd seen Cymrica do it. Then she darted to the edge of the moat. Setting her jaw she stepped onto the plank and miraculously made it across without falling off or having to yield the right of way to any rodents. Her step slowed as she approached the postern gate; her heart rate quickened. She hesitated before the opening.

And squealed as an arm shot out and hauled her in.

Cymrica clapped a hand over Marian's mouth. "Hush! They'll hear you."

Not likely. *They* seemed busy with some sport elsewhere, judging by the muffled sounds of merriment Marian now heard. She pulled away from Cymrica, sucked in air and blinked, waiting for her pulse to calm and her eyes to adjust to the gloom. With the high bailey wall blocking much of the moonlight, it was darker inside the castle complex than out. The back part of the yard where she stood lay deep in shadows. She heard Cymrica breathing close by, but could barely see her.

"I thought you were going to wait outside," the girl's voice hissed in her ear.

"I changed my mind," Marian said, without elaborating why. Her skin still crawled with the sense of unseen eyes watching her. "What's going on here?"

"I wish I knew." Cymrica drew closer and took hold of her hand. She felt the eyes, too. "There was no guard, nor was the gate locked. It fell open as I knocked."

"I know, I saw." And it made no sense. Unless Sir Guy was as slovenly about his fortress's security as he was his personal hygiene—which she doubted. Cleanliness wasn't a top priority in these days, but armed defense was. Castles were more military camps than they were residences. Sir Guy might be a pig, but he couldn't be *that* stupid. "Something's not right. The big question is what to do about it."

"Follow the voices?" Cymrica suggested.

She would.

Marian girded her loins. "All right. But this time I'm coming with you."

"Why? I only want to look, and I can move faster in this tunic than you can in that gown. I'll not let anyone see me. They might think I was a spy."

Oh, for heaven's sake... "Cymrica, we've sneaked in unannounced. At this point, we *are* spies, so we'll be safer together. If we separate we double the chances of being discovered."

Besides, I'm not staying here alone.

Marian peered through the shadows, trying to get her bearings. Hmm, a classic Norman stronghold, built for battle and to withstand siege. She'd studied scores of photos and diagrams of such places. They were all constructed along similar lines. Where she stood had to be the inner ward: a broad stretch of bare ground with the towering *donjon*, or keep, to her left and a few smaller structures to the right—probably the cookhouses, all quiet and dark. Too quiet. Wherever the activity was, it wasn't in this half of the fortress.

"They must be in the outer ward." She pointed to the high wooden wall several dozen yards before them, which ran the width of the yard, cutting the castle's interior grounds into two portions. "There, on the other side."

"Obviously," Cymrica said. "'Tis certain there be no one on this side."

Marian wasn't entirely sure of that, and she didn't think Cymrica was either, but she wasn't about to argue. She'd just caught a whiff of wood smoke—and it didn't seem to be coming from the silent cookhouses. Not a good sign.

Hiking her skirt to her knees she sprinted across the yard to investigate, with Cymrica close on her heels. Together they landed in a crouch by the gate in the wooden dividing wall, the smell of smoke stronger and the voices louder, no longer muffled. Marian could understand what they said now. So could Cymrica. But neither of them believed what they heard—sobs and laughter, coughing and hacking, and the sheriff's smooth tones sounding above it all.

"Gads, such a fuss. You should be thankful we discovered your secret affection before killing him outright. Whether he lives or dies now is in your hands. The longer you refuse Gisbourne, the longer your lover suffers—'tis that simple. Agree to the marriage and I'll cut him free."

"No! Hold firm, I beg you!" gasped out another voice, harsh and raspy. "I am happy to die for your honor—" The words broke off in a fit of coughing.

"The swine!" Cymrica said. Before Marian could stop her, she shoved open the gate a crack and peeked through. "I hope he falls in head first and roasts!"

"*What?* Let me see." Marian elbowed the girl aside, looked and froze. Her blood turned to ice water on the spot.

At the far end of the outer ward, ringed by torchlight and jeering men, hung Allan upside down, his ankles caught in a noose suspended from a scaffolding, his head several feet above a fire. A small fire, but covered with green branches. Smoke billowed up from it directly into his face. He'd asphyxiate before anyone need worry about him burning. Very nasty. But then she'd expected something nasty. What she hadn't expected was the woman across the yard.

The woman in a crimson gown, staring in horror from Allan to Sir Guy.

The woman who looked like her.

"All those times at the abbey when I thought he was visiting to see me... It must have been *her* he was there for, damn him." Cymrica sounded ready to kill Allan herself if the smoke didn't get him first. She turned an accusing eye on Marian. "I thought you said Elaine was dead."

"I thought she was. Apparently she got better."

Marian pulled back from the gate and collapsed against the wall, her head reeling. Elaine must have only been unconscious—a state she felt dangerously close to herself at the moment. Not that she begrudged the lady for being alive, but there was no way now she could offer that damned dowry in exchange for Allan. Spit.

She rubbed her temples, mentally scrambling for an alternative. Couldn't find any. Oh hell, it had been a long shot anyway, since the dowry hadn't been awarded to her yet. But now there was no chance it ever would be. She wondered what Roland would think of that—decided she didn't care. It served him right for jumping the gun and forcing her to marry him.

Cripes, what a mess. Maybe he could have their marriage annulled now and take Elaine as planned—if Sir Guy didn't take Elaine first. Of course, if Elaine really was in love with Allan, she wouldn't want Roland, but the choice probably wasn't hers. King John would never let his ward marry a penniless would-be knight. And between Sir Guy and Roland, Elaine would have to prefer the latter. Anyone would. "Even me."

Oh God, what am I thinking?

"'Even you' what? Marian, what are you mumbling about?" Cymrica whispered.

Marian swallowed, hard. "I think I've figured a way to save them, but I'll need your help."

And she told Cymrica the plan.

Cymrica balked. "No. Absolutely not. I shan't let you do it. They might kill you!"

Duh. "Well, why did we come here then? You were willing to let me risk myself before."

"I know. And I regret that." Cymrica's eyes filled with tears. "I thought wrongly before. I was blinded by...by..."

"Cymrica, *don't* start crying. I know you loved Allan—you couldn't help it. It's all right. People can't always help how they feel. Just like Allan can't help it if he loves Elaine. He shouldn't have to die for it, don't you see?"

Cymrica sniffled and wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Well, neither should you have to die for it."

"But it's partly because of me he's in this mess!"

"Originally, perhaps. But he's Elaine's problem now. If she truly loves him, *she* can save him."

"How? By marrying Sir Guy?"

"Yes! If I were in her place, I'd do whatever was needed to save the man I loved. If it meant sacrificing my own life, I'd do it." Cymrica sounded dead certain of that.

So did Elaine. "All right—yes—I'll marry him!" her voice rang out. "Now, please, *please* let Allan go."

She dissolved into sobs as Allan tried to protest between coughs and gasps.

"Bloody hell, she does love him," Cymrica muttered.

“Not so fast, my lady,” the sheriff said. “We shall release him *after* the wedding. Summon the priest, someone—quickly. Poor Allan will not last forever.” He chuckled.

Marian seethed. “I really hate that chuckle.”

“Get back!” Cymrica flattened against the wall as the gate flew open and a man hurried through en route to fetch the priest. His eyes focused ahead, he never saw them. But with the gate swinging wide, the sobs and coughs sounded even worse.

Cymrica balled her hands into fists. “If the rest of you can play martyr, so can I. *I’ll* wed Gisbourne. All he wants is a damn dowry, and mine is nearly as large as Elaine’s.”

Marvy. Roland would adore that. Marian grabbed her as she started through the gate. “No, ‘nearly as large’ might not be large enough, and if you let them know you’re here, we’ll lose our chance to do anything else. Besides, if he *would* marry you, you’d be stuck with him. If I do it, it won’t hold, because I...I’m already...m-married.”

“You sound not overly sure of that.”

Marian’s mid-section tightened. She wasn’t sure, not of anything. The marriage hadn’t been...*gulp*...consummated. Was that grounds for an annulment? In this day and age, maybe not, but added to the fact she hadn’t spoken her own vows it might make grounds enough. Certainly Roland would *want* to let her go now so he could marry Elaine. She couldn’t think of a single reason why he wouldn’t. That was what she wanted, too, wasn’t it? Just so long as he waited till she was free of Sir Guy.

Cymrica’s lips twitched at the corners as though she couldn’t decide on a grin or a frown. “Roland will want you back, have no doubt of it. I saw how he looked at you tonight. Especially how he looked at you when he thought no one watched him. I’ve ne’er seen him look at any other woman that way—not Elaine, not even Tabitha.”

Yes, and we both know what a stellar interpreter of expressions you are, Miss Allan-And-I-Have-Shared-Looks. Marian decided not to mention that. She might be a lousy liar, but she was fairly proficient at suppressing the truth, having had a lot of practice in that area. She’d have to rely on that skill when she pretended to be Elaine. It was the only chance they had.

Just look the part and keep your mouth shut.

She reached out and squeezed Cymrica’s hand. The girl couldn’t help it if she was a starry-eyed romantic.

And I can’t help it if I’m not. Except for in her dreams maybe. But then she was never herself in those dreams; she was “Maid Marian.” That made all the difference.

What a darn shame she wasn’t dreaming now. If it were Maid Marian about to face the Sheriff of Nottingham, they could be sure Robin Hood would save the day. But this wasn’t a dream, she was definitely no maid, and Robin wouldn’t be around to save anything.

In other words, kiddo, you’re on your own with the sheriff this time.

Plain old Marian would have to muddle through as best she could. Heaven help them all.

Chapter 7

Plain old Marian was in her element. Hiding in the dark. Crouched against the dividing wall, she tried not to think of the times she'd played the hiding game before. And lost. She couldn't lose this time. The safety of two others depended on her. Three, if she counted Cymrica, but Cymrica seemed to be doing fine on her own. All the girl had to do was create a diversion to get the men out of the outer ward.

Cymrica had created a dandy, aided by the fact that thatched roofs caught fire so readily. She'd set the cookhouses ablaze. Perfect because it could so easily be a natural accident. No one would suspect sabotage.

Marian crouched farther into the wall's shadow as the fire lit up the opposite side of the yard. She watched Cymrica scurry safely out the postern door to await the arrival of Allan and Elaine, then turned her gaze to the center gate.

One, two, three... Any second now...

Crash! Men tumbled through the opening like the Keystone Cops in mail. When all were out, and their attention on the blaze, she darted down the line of wall and through the gate.

The moon dipped low in the sky, the towering bailey wall blocking its light. Smoke hung heavy in the air, deepening the dark, but the wavering glow of torches set in the ground marked the spot where the captives were, the one huddled weeping near the scaffold, the other dangling in midair and coughing his lungs out. Fighting fear, she sprinted across the outer ward toward them. Elaine jerked upright, her eyes going wide. Marian's eyes widened, too, as another figure clanked out of the smoke and into the torchlight.

They'd left a guard? *Crap.*

With a low growl he lunged, and Marian turned and fled. She heard the man's heavy breath—felt the swish of air as he made and missed a grab—saw almost too late the bailey wall looming up in front of her—

Gasping, she dodged to the side.

The guard didn't. He smashed face-first into the wall and landed backward on the ground like a toppled ton of bricks.

Ouch. She peered at him a moment to make sure he wouldn't be rising anytime soon, then relieved him of sword and dagger and stumbled back to the scaffold.

"W-well done, my lady," Allan choked out. He looked vastly amused for a man in the process of suffocating.

"Save your breath." Using the blade of the sword Marian raked away the fire he hung over, scattering it to burn out in pieces against the hard-packed earth.

Elaine watched her, stunned. "I... You... I..."

"I know. I felt the same way the first time I saw you," Marian said. "Speaking of which, I'm glad you're not dead." With the ground below Allan now clear, she cut the bindings off his hands and arms with the dagger, then climbed the scaffold and began sawing at the noose on his ankles.

"Allan, watch your head," she warned—a little too late. He hit the ground with a thud and a grunt. "Oh! I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

She scrambled off her perch and rushed to his side. Elaine was already there, kneeling over him and kissing him, wetting his face with her tears and getting soot all over herself in the process.

Marian tapped her on the shoulder. "Um, excuse me, but we really don't have time for that now. You two have to get out of here. Quickly."

"How?" Elaine looked up, her expression tragic in the torchlight. "They'll ne'er let me go."

"If this works, they won't even know you're gone," Marian muttered.

Allan struggled to his feet, swaying and coughing. "Give...give me that sword and I'll take us out of here, or die trying."

He would, too, Marian thought. Die, that was. The man obviously had a suicidal streak. So did she, probably, to be planning what she was.

She shook her head. "No, there's another way. Elaine and I will trade gowns. Then I'll run into the other yard, pretending I'm trying to escape. When they chase me, you two can slip out the postern gate. Cymrica's outside with horses. She'll take you to Hunterdon Manor. You'll be safe there."

Allan looked doubtful. "What about you?"

"I'll stay here and make them think I'm Elaine." *I hope.* "That way they won't follow you. It's her they want."

"Everyone wants me." Elaine stood wringing her hands. "'Tis that cursed dowry. Oh, why could I not have been born poor?"

"Trust me, sweet lady, 'tis no great blessing to be poor," Allan told her.

Elaine stopped wringing her hands to grab his. "But I've no more wish to go the manor than stay here! What if Roland decides to finally marry me? What then will happen to us?"

Good question. Marian wondered if she should tell her that Roland had already married another—decided not to since she was a little uncertain on that point and there was no time to explain. Besides, it was Roland's job to explain it. Why should she make things any easier for him?

"We'll go on as we always have," Allan said, his voice thick with emotion. "'Tis not as though the king would give you to me whate'er befalls. But mayhap Lord Roland will allow me to join his household. If I can only be near you, my lady, to guard you and serve you, I ask nothing more."

He dropped to his knees before her, brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Marian wanted to smack them both. "If you don't get going, you won't be serving anyone ever again. Allan, check the other yard, see if they're still busy with the fire. Elaine, give me your gown. Hurry, there's no time to waste."

Without waiting for an answer, she pulled her own gown up and over her head, becoming lost for a moment in a tangle of fabric. She heard Elaine gasp, then a series of muffled thuds.

Oh no.

"How nice to see you again, my sweet. And to see so *much* of you." The words were followed by a hated chuckle.

Damn. Marian let her gown drop back down to her feet.

"Oh, please do not stop on my account," the sheriff said. "If you were going to disrobe, by all means, continue." He held a teary-eyed Elaine by the wrist. Allan lay on the ground a few feet away, unconscious again.

Poor man. Marian stared as several soot-streaked guards replaced his bonds. Well, her luck was certainly holding. It was lousy as usual.

"I...I..." She thought fast. "I was not taking it off. I was *putting it on.*"

The sheriff's brows lifted. "Ah, I see. And why would you be doing that, if I might ask?"

“’Tis obvious, is it not?” She tried hard to imitate Elaine, and even harder to not think about how poorly she did it. “We...we switched gowns, hoping to fool you. But you are not fooled. I can see you are not.” That last came out on a desperate squeak.

“You can see that, can you?” The sheriff’s brows lifted another notch. “Perhaps ’tis just a trick of the light.”

A comedian, he wasn’t.

“Of course I see it. A man of your intelligence, you must know I am Elaine and *she* is the imposter.” Even to her own ears she sounded ridiculous.

Elaine stared at her in horror.

Marian caught her eye, trying to will her to silence. “’Twas a worthy plan, good maid, and I thank you for it, but I have changed my mind. I cannot allow you to sacrifice yourself for me. ’Twould be most dishonorable. I...I should ne’er survive the guilt.”

“Your survival is a debatable point in any case.” The sheriff grinned. “I’ve not yet decided what I shall do with you. All I know for certain is you are *not* Elaine.”

Blast the man, he could at least sound a *little* doubtful. If her legs hadn’t been shaking so badly Marian would have stamped her foot. “You can’t be sure of that, damn it!”

The sheriff chuckled and she wanted to stomp him. “Oh, but I am sure, my sweet. You’ve just proved it. The well-bred Lady Elaine would ne’er say damn.”

“I might if I were angry enough,” Elaine piped up.

Big, big help. Marian buried her face in her hands. This was hopeless.

A crash sounded—the dividing wall gate flying open.

Her head snapped up and she saw Sir Guy’s bulk filling the entrance. He paused a moment, staring, then stalked forward, scowling and soaked to the skin. Some of the water they’d used to extinguish the fire must have landed on him, probably the first bath he’d had in years. He didn’t look happy about it. Behind him the rest of his soldiers poured into the ward, with a fat friar bringing up the rear, huffing and puffing to catch up.

Marian swallowed, painfully, as the entire company ground to a halt, none of them wanting to get too close, all of them gawking like she had two heads. Yeah, her appearance here must seem a mystery, like black magic. Wary mutterings rose up—“demon” and “witch.”

Sir Guy glared, anger battling fear in his expression. Elaine looked on, trembling, while Allan groaned on the ground as he regained consciousness. The friar pushed to the front of the crowd, holding aloft a crucifix in one hand, a staff in the other, and uttering prayers. Marian choked back hysterical laughter. Only the sheriff took it all in stride. He stood calmly in the center of the scene, chuckling and grinning like a cat surrounded by mice, very amused. He would be.

“I warned you she was a demon,” Sir Guy bit out.

The chuckle exploded into a full belly laugh. “Nonsense!”

“Who is she, then? How came she here?” Sir Guy looked like he was afraid he knew, that she must have appeared in a puff of hellish smoke.

“We were just about to discover that—if only to satisfy my curiosity,” the sheriff said. “Not that it matters now, since we have Elaine for you to wed. But I do like to know whom I’m about to execute.”

With Elaine in tow he stepped toward Marian.

She gasped as the friar threw himself in front of her.

“Nay!” the man boomed out. “She is one of Satan’s minions. Smell you not the evil? Touch her not, my lord, lest she shrivel your flesh and devour your soul! Only a man of God can deal with such creatures.”

He flung about to face her and the men behind her, his arms outstretched, brandishing staff and cross. “Stand you all back! Make way! I shall drive the witch from these walls and cast her back into the fires of Hell!”

“Been heavy at the wine have you, good friar?” The sheriff heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Leave off, Tuck. We called you here for a wedding, not witches. If yon wench is a demon, I’ll eat your staff.”

He pushed Elaine toward Sir Guy and grabbed the back of the friar’s robe, intending to do likewise with him.

A maniacal gleam lit Tuck’s eyes. Marian had already paled at the mention of his name. *Friar Tuck*? She went whiter when he shot her a wink. In one quick move he shoved her away and turned on the sheriff with upraised staff.

“Start chewing, my lord!”

Marian stumbled backward, staring in disbelief as all hell broke loose—literally. From out of nowhere, it seemed, the yard was suddenly alive with...she didn’t know what. Weird things covered in leaves and skins, bizarre hybrid creatures with antlers and animal heads. They ran out of the shadows on two legs, slid down ropes dropped from the battlements like spiders descending a web.

Cries of “*wood-devils—’tis the wood-devils!*” split the air.

Sir Guy’s men scattered in all directions, shrieking their heads off.

“Hold, *hold*, you idiots! Stand and fight!” the sheriff bellowed over the din. But he had his own hands full fending off the friar, who charged him like a man possessed.

Marian turned to see two of the devils helping Allan to his feet, cutting his bonds. Elaine flew into his arms as several more of the creatures surrounded them in a protective circle.

“Call for Tuck!” one of them shouted in a remarkably human voice. “We’ll join these lovebirds before any can naysay them!”

“Aye, Tuck! Friar Tuck!” more voices sounded, with laughter ringing between the words. “He was summoned for a wedding—we’ll give him one! Here, Tuck! To us, man!”

Allan and Elaine clung to each other and kissed.

Watching the scene, Marian’s eyes stung, both from emotion and the smoky air.

The stables in the yard broke open and panicked horses galloped out, joining the rout. One of the beasts bumped the sheriff as he blocked a blow from Friar Tuck’s staff with his sword. The sword went flying, its owner lurched back, and Tuck finished the job with a stout crack to his head. The sheriff’s knees buckled and he collapsed in a heap on the ground.

Marian gaped, dumbfounded, as the friar made the sign of the cross over him, then darted off toward Allan and Elaine, swinging his staff at anything in mail.

More heads cracked.

She dodged to the side to avoid being flattened in the crush, stumbled and landed on her knees beside the sheriff. Something crashed into her from behind and she pitched forward onto his chest. Gasping, she pulled back and rolled away, but not before feeling the rise and fall of his breath. As she scrambled to her feet again, a shadow fell over her—Sir Guy, his eyes blazing, the stink of alcohol mixing with his sweat. Marian had seen drunken fury before, knew she was looking at it now.

She froze.

His gaze slanted from her to the sheriff. "Is he dead?"

"No." The word came out a dry croak. She swallowed and tried again. "Just...unconscious."

Slowly, carefully, she backed away, one tiny step at a time.

"A pity. 'Twould serve me better if 'twere otherwise. There'd be nay debt if the one I owed were nay more." Sir Guy crouched by the sheriff and felt the pulse at his neck. His lips twisted into a snarl. "Curse your hard head, Nottingham. You wanted payment, did you? Mayhap I should pay you now and have done with it, ay?"

He groped at his belt and unsheathed a dagger.

Marian halted in mid-step as the glint of the blade held her mesmerized. Sir Guy hauled up the sheriff by his hair, knelt behind him, and slit his throat from ear to ear. Her stomach turned over as the blood spurted out over everything.

God...

"There you go, Nottingham, *payment* in full. And we'll blame the wood-devils for your death, shall we?" With a grim smile Sir Guy dropped the body to earth and stood up, the dagger, sticky red and dripping, still clutched in his hand. He peered about, saw Marian, and his smile hardened into murder. Again.

"Witch! I'll not have you witnessing against me." Growling like a bear, he lunged for her.

She spun about and ran, zigzagging through the chaos. The bailey wall rose up sooner than expected—no chance to avoid it this time. She could only swivel at the last second, slamming into it with her back. The impact rattled her teeth and knocked the wind out of her. Battling for breath she flattened herself against the cold stones, hanging onto consciousness by a thread, a butterfly pinned to the mounting board.

Sir Guy appeared before her out of the smoke. In a dizzy blur she watched his hand raise, saw him throw the dagger, waited for it to pierce her heart.

Heard a metallic ping and a dull thud instead.

Huh? Drop-jawed, she traced the sounds downward, and blinked. There on the ground lay the dagger, beside it the arrow that shot the blade straight out of the air.

No. This isn't real.

She lifted her head, looked. Her heart stopped. She was dreaming, she must be. For she saw *him*. A tall figure, his face hidden in the folds of a deep hood. As she stared, he lowered his bow and moved forward.

Marian's legs crumpled out from under her. Darkness closed in and she slid down the wall into mindless oblivion.

Chapter 8

No gentle recovery. Marian regained consciousness with a jolt, awoke to memories of shouts and smoke and panic, to her own death staring her in the face in the form of Sir Guy. A wall at her back. Nowhere to run. A knife dripping blood. An arrow—

And a shadow man in a hood, stepping toward her out of the chaos.

“Robin?” She called the name aloud, just a brittle whisper, barely audible. She didn’t expect an answer.

“Mmm, ’tis only me, I’m afraid,” a low voice said.

Her eyes flew open to surprising brightness. The awful night retreated like a bad dream, leaving only the memories. Which were bad enough.

Marian blinked a few times, adjusting to the light, the peace. Afternoon sunshine streamed in through the window of the lord’s bedchamber in Hunterdon Manor. The lord himself sat in a chair facing the bed where she lay, his head bent over a book. So calm he looked, so handsome with the sun glinting off his black hair and turning his skin a warm golden tan. Her chest constricted at the sight of him. Why, she had no idea. Not from joy certainly. Maybe just relief that she was someplace clean and safe, that she’d lived through the night.

“Roland.” She said it on a sigh. “It’s you.”

“Yes.” With slow, deliberate movements he closed the book and laid it on the table by the bed. “Disappointed? Whom were you expecting?”

His gaze shifted to meet hers, something hot and probing hidden in the depths of his eyes.

Suddenly the room didn’t feel quite so safe. What she’d taken for calm, she could see now was control. He was holding himself on a short leash. *Angry?* Marian supposed he had reason to be. According to the standards of the times she’d been a very naughty wife, sneaking off the way she had. She assumed she *was* still his wife, and likely to stay that way with Elaine now married. Lucky Elaine. She and Allan were both simple-minded enough to probably be very happy together. Just like in a fairytale the damsel-in-distress got a brave warrior to guard her honor and love her devotedly.

And what do I get?

The murky memory of a hooded shadow and an arrogant earl who stared at her now as though he’d like to eat her for brunch.

She cleared her throat. Ugh, she was dry. “I...I wasn’t expecting anyone. I’m just a little... disoriented, I guess.”

“I’m not surprised. You’ve had a busy night, by all accounts.”

King of understatement, wasn’t he? What accounts? How much had he been told and by whom? She was afraid to say anything about the events herself until she found out how things stood. God only knew what the ramifications of the previous night were. Where was Cymrica? Home safely, she hoped. How did she get here herself? Marian didn’t dare ask.

She gazed up at Roland as innocently as she could manage. “You’ve had a busy night, too, I understand.”

His eyes went wary. Good, she’d wanted to rock his boat. The best defense was a strong offense, she’d always heard. She’d never tried the tactic, but the way things were going she’d better start learning.

“In what way do you mean?” he asked.

She braced for an explosion as she dropped the one bomb in her arsenal. “How’s Tabitha?”

The bomb fizzled.

“Ah, is that all?” If anything, Roland looked relieved by the question—which made her wonder what he’d expected her to ask.

“*Ah, is that all?*” she repeated. “That’s all you have to say?”

“Let me phrase it this way...” He rose from the chair and sat on the bed, leaned forward and rested a hand on each side of her head. “Tabitha is none of your concern, nothing for you to worry about. She is merely a friend—while *you* are my wife. You’ve no need to be jealous.”

Uh-oh, the way he said “wife.”

“I’m not jealous.” She shrank back into the pillows as he leaned closer, but there was only so far she could shrink and he kept leaning. In a matter of seconds his nose almost touched hers. *Talk about having your space invaded.*

“Liar,” he said.

“I...I’m not lying. I don’t care what she is to you.” She didn’t, did she? She didn’t think she cared. Why should she?

“Then why did you mention her?”

“I...um...just wanted to let you know I’m aware of the situation. That’s all.”

“And what situation is that, my lady?”

“That you and she are...are...”

“Lovers?”

Marian wished he hadn’t said that. In his husky voice the word was almost like the act itself. It rolled over her like a velvet caress. And she didn’t like being caressed, not visually, verbally, or manually. Roland was already doing the first two, and she had a horrible feeling the third method wasn’t far off. Except the prospect didn’t seem quite so horrible as she would have thought. Which was horrible in and of itself. Definitely cause for panic, something she’d always been good at.

Help.

She braced her hands against his chest to push him back. Good lord, he was solid as a rock. How did a scholar ever get so muscular? She dropped her hands as though scorched. She felt like she had been. “Um...that isn’t exactly what I meant.”

His brows rose slightly. “No?”

Oh hell.

“Well, maybe that is what I meant, but—”

“Marian, stop it. You’re no good at this.”

She almost whimpered. “I know that.” *Damn it.* “What’s your point?”

“That this has nothing to do with Tabitha. You’re trying to distract me from what *you* did last night. Aren’t you?”

“Well...maybe a little.”

“’Twill not work, my lady. I can see through you like glass.”

She didn’t doubt it. And his eyes were hot enough to melt glass, too.

“Now if you truly wish to distract me...” He grinned, slowly. “I could suggest an alternate course of action.”

That’s what she was afraid of. “Like...like what?”

“Guess.”

She didn’t have to. It was obvious. She was already *in* bed, for crying out loud. He...he wanted to...

“No! Please don’t. I...I...”

Roland drew back, blinking, the soul of innocence. “What? You’d not like a cool drink?”

Huh? She stared up in shock, eyes wide, heart pounding, teetering on the edge of a whopper panic-attack. His words hauled her back from the brink just in time.

“An easier distraction, is it not, asking me for a drink? A gentleman would never refuse a lady such a simple request. And I *am* a gentleman, sweetheart.”

“Oh.” She could almost believe it. Almost.

“I’ll wager you *are* thirsty, are you not?”

A sure bet. She was parched. And embarrassed by her near topple into hysteria. Hastily she raked her wits and dignity back together. “Y-yes, I’d appreciate a drink. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” His eyes locked onto hers. “I want you to trust me, Marian—completely—to know that I will never hurt you or force you to do anything you’ve no wish to. Will you believe that?”

Whoa, where did that come from? The request caught her off guard. A fresh flurry of panic rushed in, different from before, worse. Her throat tightened. The emotional contact he offered was scarier than the physical.

Trust? He had no idea what he asked, *who* he asked.

“I’m sorry, I—”

“Please?” His gaze pulled at her, warm, soft, pleading.

Something inside her melted just a little. An inner door opened just a crack. *Oh hell.* She’d probably regret this, but...

She took a deep breath. “All right, I’ll try.” There, she’d said it. “No guarantees, but... I’ll try.” Just two tiny words, but a big step forward for her.

Roland seemed to recognize the effort it took on her part to say them. He rose to his feet and swept a low bow before her. “I can ask nothing more, my lady.”

He smiled—beautifully—a smile that lit up the whole room. Marian found herself smiling back. Would wonders never cease?

“I’ll order some water for you.” He turned toward the door.

Her smile dropped. “Water? How about some wine?”

After the night she’d had she *really* needed a drink. A real drink, not water. *Bleck.* Besides, this was the Middle Ages, for heaven’s sake. Medieval people never drank water if they could avoid it. Well, maybe they did, but she’d always liked to think they didn’t—it was part of the era’s appeal. They always drank wine or beer or mead or something like that, right?

Wrong.

Roland turned back to look at her, his chin lowered thoughtfully. “Methinks you drink a wee bit much wine, my lady.”

“Me knows so,” Marian muttered. But that was her business, not his. She stuck out her lower lip and pouted like a child. Juvenile behavior, she knew, but she’d rarely been able to act like a child when she was one. She figured she was owed an occasional pout now to make up for all the ones she’d missed early on. “I want wine.”

“Water will quench your thirst better. And the Hunterdon well offers the sweetest, clearest in Sherwood,” Roland coaxed. “Once you taste it you’ll want none other. ’Twill be most beneficial for you. Trust me.”

She didn’t want *beneficial*, she wanted wine, damn it. But he was testing her with that “trust me,” and they both knew it. The sneak. She sank back into the pillow and blew out a sigh.

“Okay, I’ll try the water. But I won’t promise to like it.”

“Just so long as you try it, that is all I ask.” He shot her a wink. “Drink well water now, and you’ll have ample opportunity for wine tonight at the banquet.”

Her head lifted off the pillow. “Banquet?” *Methinks I smell a rat.* “What banquet?”

He coughed and suddenly appeared to be fascinated by the tapestry on the opposite wall. “*Ahem...* I’ve ordered a banquet tonight to, ah, celebrate our nuptials.”

Our nuptials? Crap.

She’d almost forgotten. How could she forget *that*? Marian braced up on her elbows and glared daggers at him. “The deal’s off. I can’t trust you. I’ll never trust you. I can’t even *try*.”

“May I ask why not?”

His voice sounded calm as ever, but a desperate gleam tinged his eyes. He knew darn well what she was talking about. He knew he was in trouble.

“You may, but you don’t need to. You *know* why, you son of a bitch.”

“Marian, please, your language.”

“What about it?” *Pompous prig.* “Just because I don’t curse much doesn’t mean I don’t know how. I grew up with pros, I’ll have you know. I can probably curse rings around *you*.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

Was that a challenge?

“Don’t tempt me,” she ground out. “You said I should trust you because you would, and I quote, ‘never force me to do anything I’ve no wish to.’ But you already *have*. You forced me to marry you, you rotten snake.”

“‘Rotten snake’ isn’t so harsh a term,” he couldn’t resist pointing out.

“It is when it applies to you, you bastard!”

“Ah, now ‘bastard’ is a stronger one.”

“Hey, are you listening to me, or critiquing my cursing?”

“Um, both. ’Tis most interesting when ladies swear. In my experience they do it so differently than men.”

“Oh yeah? That’s only because you’ve never heard *me*, buster.” And she rattled off a stream that turned the air blue. Or would have in her own time period. Who knew what some of the expressions meant to him. Roland seemed suitably impressed nonetheless.

He gave her a small bow. “A most worthy display.”

“*Uhhhh...*” She collapsed backward into the pillows and buried her face in her hands. “I give up.”

“No.” Startling her with the movement, he sat beside her and grabbed her wrists. He pulled her hands away and stared hard into her eyes. “*Don’t* say that. I hate hearing you say such a thing, even in jest.”

“I wasn’t jesting,” she said, feeling grim.

“All the more reason not to say it. Never surrender so easily. ’Tis a poor habit to even think the term. It weakens one—inside. And leaves you open to abuse on the outside. Too many are harmed simply because they allow themselves to be. Do you understand?”

Curious advice coming from him. What brought this on?

Marian lowered her gaze against the intensity in his, only to see another face staring at her in her mind’s eye. A young face, an angel with a devil’s grin. Orlando. In different words he’d told her almost the same thing. How about that?

Tears leaked out under her eyelids and rolled down her cheeks. Where *was* Orlando? Hiding in the woods, planning his next heist? She was worried about him,

darn it. Somehow she had to find him before he landed in serious trouble. Besides, she'd grown used to seeing him everyday at the store. It had only been a day now since she'd last seen him, but she missed him already. A lot. It amazed her how much she missed him. She hadn't realized how much the kid meant to her.

"Marian, are you listening? I asked you a question."

"What?" Her eyes snapped open. For a split second she was surprised to see Roland looking down at her. She'd almost forgotten he was there. Rather strange, since he held her wrists, an action that should have sent her into a fit of the screaming heebie-jeebies. She couldn't stand any forced immobility, that feeling of being trapped and powerless.

She stared at his hands on her and waited for the panic to hit. It didn't. Very strange. The way Roland held her didn't feel threatening. Why not? It couldn't possibly be because she *was* beginning to trust him. Could it?

"Marian? What are you thinking?"

She shifted her gaze to meet his, saw him watching her with a puzzled look—worried, frightened even. For some reason it struck her funny and she giggled, surprising herself again because she wasn't the giggly type.

"I was just looking at how you're holding my wrists. Normally I hate that."

"You do?" It took a second to register. When it did, he jerked back, releasing her as though she'd sprouted spikes. "Oh. I'm...sorry."

He looked so chagrined she giggled again. "It's all right. It wasn't a problem this time." She swiped the tears off her eyes and cheeks with the back of her hand. "Now, what did you want to know?"

"What?" He blinked, looking more puzzled than ever.

"The question?" she prompted. "You said you asked me something. What was it?"

He stared blankly a moment, and then she saw the light bulb go on in his mind—or the candle perhaps, given the era.

"'Tis not important. I merely asked if you understood my little speech on the... *ahem*... evils of surrender." He seemed embarrassed about it now.

"Of course it's important. And I do understand. In fact, I've been told something similar before. It was good advice then and it's still good. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, his eyes hooding, looking wary, like he worried she might be setting him up.

She was. "But I have a question for you now."

"Um..." He braced himself. "Yes?"

"Yes. This 'never surrender' you spoke of... Does it apply to my dealings with you as well? Hmmm?" She waggled her eyebrows up and down at him.

Roland sucked in his breath sharply and let it out slowly. He dropped his hands into his lap and stared at them.

"I was afraid you'd ask that." He sounded most unhappy about it.

But Marian was in no mood to be merciful. She'd just remembered the coming banquet. And the reason for it. "Well? Does it?"

Still staring at his hands he heaved a heavy sigh, one that must have weighed a thousand pounds at least. "To be perfectly fair, yes, I suppose it does."

His gaze flashed forward to meet hers again. "But honestly, sweetheart, I'm not your enemy. I wish I could make you believe that."

For a second, she wished he could, too—but just a second. Darn him, he had no right to sound so sincere, to look so tender. He said one thing and acted another. She was sick of the game. Words were cheap.

Put your money where your mouth is, buddy.

“Okay. If you mean that, I *can* think of one way you could prove it.”

Roland responded like a drowning man thrown a lifeline, grabbing onto it with gusto. “Anything. If it lies within my power to give, ’tis yours, I swear it. Just name what you want.”

“An annulment.”

His eyes went tragic. His mouth dropped open, closed, opened and shut again—the lifeline jerked away. He was back to drowning, and going down for the third time.

“Marian, that...isn’t possible.”

“Why not?” Her own eyes blazed anger and hurt. “You said you’d give me anything I wanted, didn’t you?”

“Anything within *my power*,” he shouted, and then quickly caught himself. One could almost hear the screech of brakes as he reined in his emotions. “An annulment is *not* within my reach.”

“Well then, neither am I within your reach.” She rolled over on her side, refusing to look at him. “I knew you didn’t mean what you said. And this proves I’m right not to trust you. So there.”

“Do you have any idea how infantile you sound?”

“Keep it up. *Flattery* will get you everywhere.”

He scrambled off the bed and raced around to the side she was facing, knelt on the floor to put himself on eye level with her. “Marian, please be reasonable. Annulments are a serious matter, for the Church to decide. I’m but an earl, not the Pope. I’ve no control over such things.”

“Bullshit. Money talks. You could buy an annulment, couldn’t you?”

“’Tis not so simple as that. We’ve no grounds for annulment.”

“How about the fact that I didn’t speak my own vows?” Ice dripped off every syllable. “If you want my opinion, it’s not a valid marriage to begin with. We probably don’t even need an annulment.”

“’Tis valid enough. Father Boniface’s word is the one that counts, and he’s near deaf. I doubt he truly heard any of the vows. The man can barely hear himself. But he saw your lips moving when you were shouting during the ceremony and thinks you were...um...a willing participant. He’ll swear on the Bible you were, if anyone asks. Besides, most of my people witnessed the wedding, and they’ll swear likewise, even if I order them not to. They *want* me married.”

Marian sniffed. “Some earl you are, if you can’t even control your own people. Cymrica says it’s because you’re too soft with them. She says everyone knows your threats are worthless.”

“Oh, I see, I should have people racked and flogged and broken on the wheel to suit you, should I?”

Her breath caught like he’d slapped her. “That’s a horrible thing to say. You know that isn’t what I meant.”

She flung away from him onto her other side.

He raced round the bed again and was kneeling there waiting to face her before she’d rolled to a stop. “In truth, my lady, ’tis difficult to know exactly what you mean.”

She opened her mouth to reply, then snapped it shut just as fast. He was right. There were too many things about herself that she’d never be able to tell him or anyone else, never be able to explain. She was an alien here, a stranger in a strange land, a lost soul. And the worst of it was she’d always been lost. Not Maid Marian, but Marian the Misfit, the one who never belonged. No wonder she’d lived in dreams. The only place she’d ever felt even remotely comfortable was Mr.

Mueller's store, and now she'd never see it or the old man again. Loneliness swamped her; she buried her face in the pillow and spilled out silent tears for who she was and what she'd never be.

Roland groaned. "As if Cymrica weren't bad enough. Why must I always be surrounded by weeping women?"

Typical male reaction. Not concerned she was upset, just concerned that her upset disturbed his peace. Marian heard him rise from his knees, felt him staring down at her.

"God's ribs," he cursed.

She sniffled back her sobs and rolled over to look at him. "Oh, surely you can do better than that."

He let out a bark of laughter—little merriment in it—and sat sideways on the bed to face her, tucking one leg beneath him and leaving the other hang over the edge. "Most certainly I can. And in Latin and Greek no less."

"How very scholarly. Maybe we can have a cursing competition sometime."

Her breath hitched as he braced himself over her on one arm.

"And the prize?" With his free hand he began brushing the hair off her face, slowly, one damp curl at a time.

She tried not to flinch at his touch. Almost succeeded. "If I win you can put me away in a convent."

"That sounds not overly pleasant for you. Dull places, convents, so I've been told."

"I'd love it. I'm very dull myself. Honest." The word ended on a squeak as he smoothed back another auburn strand.

"I disagree. But the question is hypothetical in any case."

Amazing. The way he spoke, even terms like hypothetical sounded sensual.

I'm in deep trouble.

"But what if *I* should win? Do you want to hear the prize I choose...or shall I save it for a surprise?" Carefully he tucked the last stray tendril behind her ear, his fingertips trailing down the side of her neck in the process.

Her voice rasped like a rusty hinge. "If you're smart you'll pick the same prize I did. Put me in a convent. Please. You'll be much happier with me gone. Really, it's for the best."

Her idea spilled out in a babble. She expanded the plan as she rolled along. "It'll solve everything. You can hide me in a convent, somewhere far away, and tell everyone I've died. That way we don't need an annulment and you'll be free to marry again."

"Hmm... But wouldn't that make me guilty of bigamy?"

"I won't tell anyone if you won't."

He chuckled as though she joked.

Marian didn't see anything funny in the situation at all. She blinked up at him, feeling like she was grasping at straws. She was.

"Roland, you don't want me. I'm awful marriage material. I'll make a terrible wife, I know I will."

"And I think you should let me be the judge of that."

"You don't know me well enough to judge anything about me!"

"Perhaps I know you better than you realize." His eyes took on a soft glow.

Hers grew desperate. "I don't see how. You haven't even known me a full day yet."

He leaned closer. "For some, a day may be all that is needed. Time is relative, my lady. It ambles or speeds depending upon how we use it."

Who was this guy, Einstein's ancestor?

"You won't give me an inch, will you?" So, okay, it was a saying from her own era and he probably wouldn't understand it, but she didn't give a damn. The conversation was getting way out of hand and she could feel a major pout coming on.

"An inch of what?" he asked innocently. "I should be happy to give you far more than an inch. Several inches at least." His mouth curved into a wicked grin.

Marian almost swallowed her tongue. She shrank back, trying not to hyperventilate.

Roland hovered over her. "I can give you much if you'll but accept it. Think, lady. I'm a man of power. I have wealth, learning, a sound body. Women tell me I'm handsome—"

"You left out modest," she interjected on a croak.

"That, I've never been accused of."

"Gee, I wonder why."

"Wench. Stop interrupting me while I'm trying to offer you the world."

"World, hell. You can't even get me a lousy drink of water."

He pulled back, slapping his hand against his forehead. "Curse me, I forgot." Several colorful expressions followed, none of them Latin or Greek, but all ripe and pithy.

"The swearing contest is off," Marian grumbled. "You'd win."

"I knew that," he said, striding for the door. He opened it and ordered, "Hodge, on your feet, lad. Fetch your mistress a cool drink from the well—swiftly."

"Aye, m'lord!" she heard the boy answer, and then a thumping of boots as he raced down the stairs to the courtyard.

"Couldn't get it yourself, huh?" Marian said. Why, she wasn't sure, except that something in Roland brought out her waspish side. Which was funny, because up until meeting him she hadn't even known she had a waspish side.

"I could," Roland replied, "but 'twouldn't look proper with Hodge waiting in the outer chamber to do my bidding."

"Lucky Hodge."

"Mind your tongue...or I shall find another use for it." He narrowed his eyes and shot her a smoldering look.

Her face flamed. "I thought you said I could trust you."

"And I thought you said you would not. If I've nothing to lose..." He made as if to step toward the bed, a predatory gleam in his eye.

Marian gulped, thought fast. "You...you're supposed to convince me. *Giving up* so easily?"

"Not at all. Merely proving I meant what I said." With a chuckle Roland relaxed his stance and leaned back against the wall by the door, crossed his arms over his chest. "Never fear, lady, you *can* trust me. If not, I'd be across the room by now and under those covers with you."

He smiled and she felt a tiny prick of disappointment that he wasn't under the covers with her. Very odd. The feeling unnerved her more than Roland himself did. She groaned and burrowed deeper into the bed, suddenly too aware how bruised and sore she was from the night's adventure. Every muscle ached, including some she never knew she had.

"I could kill for a couple of aspirin," she muttered, then instantly wanted to bite out her tongue for mentioning something that wouldn't be invented for several hundred years. She glanced at Roland, but he'd already turned away and seemed not to have heard—or if he had, didn't care. He stood by the door, waiting for Hodge.

Youthful feet hurried up the stairs, and Roland reached through the half-open doorway. His hand came back in holding a tall tankard with water droplets glistening on its outside like diamonds.

“Good lad. Now ask Godgiftu to brew some willow bark tea. Strong.”

“*Bleggh*, that be bitter stuff. I mean...*ahem*...aye, m’lord. I’ll bring it anon.” Hodge’s footsteps retreated into the distance again.

Willow bark tea?

Marian’s brow wrinkled as Roland returned to the bedside. She squinted up at him. This was curious. A lot of herbalism was rooted in history, so it wasn’t exactly an alien subject to her. She knew willow bark was the forerunner of aspirin, at any rate. It contained the same active ingredient. But how could Roland have known that? Or was his requesting it just a coincidence? The remedy was an old one, even for this period. And heaven knew she probably looked like she needed a painkiller.

It was still darn considerate of him to think of it. Men weren’t usually the nurturing type, not in her experience. Men always unnerved her, but Roland unnerved her in a whole new way. He made her consider things she’d never wanted any part of. He kept being...*nice*, damn it. He was making it very difficult to dislike him—especially now with the way he looked standing before her in a sparkle of sunbeams. Glorious.

He wore a white wool robe that almost glowed in the light, the folds of fabric belted in at his middle by a burgundy sash, the whole effect remarkably biblical—like a young King David. All he needed was a harp and a slingshot. Visually the man was a work of art. She admired him like a painting or a sculpture, on a purely aesthetic level. Nothing physical about it, of course. She couldn’t deal with physical attraction. Not in reality anyway. Only in her dreams. Only with Robin.

Robin... She stiffened at the thought. Oh God, what *had* happened last night? She couldn’t possibly have seen who she thought she did. Not *him*. Not unless she’d finally tipped over the edge of neurosis into stark raving lunacy.

“Marian? What is it? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

She startled at the sound of his voice. Her hands clutched at the covers. A ghost? No, worse. A dream come to life. Maybe. How could she know for sure? Given her mental history the insanity theory was the safer bet.

“Lady, answer me. Are you well?” Roland peered down at her, his dark eyes narrowed, whether with concern or irritation she couldn’t tell and didn’t want to find out. Neither reaction appealed to her.

She stared up at him, tears stinging her eyes. “No. I’m miserable.”

He blew out his breath and sat next to her, held out the tankard. “You’re just overwrought. ’Tis small wonder. Here, sweetheart, you’ll feel better if you drink something.”

Crap, there he went, being considerate again. But she had to admit the steadiness in his voice helped calm her. She sniffled and wiped her nose on the edge of the sheet. Hardly ladylike, but then she was hardly a lady, even if she was married to a lord. *Damn*. She blinked back the tears and hauled herself upright. The covers dropped into her lap. Cool air touched her torso.

Mmm, that felt nice.

Roland made a strangling noise in his throat.

Hmm, that sounded weird. What was his problem?

She glanced down and saw the problem was hers, too. Well darn, would you look at that. Bare skin. Figured. This wasn’t an age for nighties or PJs. Folks

generally just stripped and hopped under the blankets. Funny she hadn't thought of that before. It just proved how distracted she was that she hadn't even realized she'd been lying in bed...

She screamed as full awareness struck. "*Aaaaagh!*" Blushing furiously, she jerked the covers up to her chin. "I'm naked!"

"I noticed," Roland said, a pained expression on his face. Not leering the way other men had looked at her, just...uncomfortable.

Why? Was she *that* ugly? She didn't think so. She'd been told the opposite, in fact, that she had a gorgeous body—slender where it needed to be and round where it counted most. And she'd developed the round parts early. Too early, unfortunately.

Suddenly she realized what his problem must be. Her blush deepened. He'd probably never seen a naked woman in full daylight before. In these times men weren't supposed to look at naked women, not even their own wives. Not even doctors could look. According to the rules of the day she was pretty sure she'd committed a sin by exposing herself. Would she have to confess it to Father Boniface and do penance? Oh heck, Father Boniface couldn't hear a confession anyway. Better to just apologize to Roland.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered out.

"I'm not," he whispered hoarsely.

Marian glanced suspiciously at him as she tucked the covers snugly around herself from under her arms on down. Maybe his reaction hadn't been shock, after all. Damn, she was such an idiot about these things. She knew so little about normal sexual relations, had no idea how non-perverts reacted to women. She hadn't even realized there were men who *weren't* perverts. She'd thought they all were to a greater or lesser degree—usually greater. Maybe she'd been wrong about that, too?

Her lower lip protruded in a pout. She couldn't help it. The fact that Roland made her question so many long-held beliefs was really disconcerting. Alarm bells tingled all over her. Some of the tingles didn't feel too bad actually—reminded her of her dreams a little. Which was probably a very bad thing. Because she never remembered the specifics of the sex in her dreams, just that it was...different from the sex she'd experienced in real life. Real sex she remembered too many specifics of. That was the problem. She was so afraid of repeating any of those specifics.

What if that's just the way sex is?

And now the gleam in Roland's eyes made her ask, *but what if it's not?*

"Marian?"

Her gaze slanted back to his, warily. "What?"

He looked in control again, his expression cool and collected. That irked her, too. Why should he be so calm while she was sitting here going insane?

"In the interest of fair play," he began, "I believe 'tis only right I warn you that your pouting accentuates the sweetness of your lips and makes me want to kiss you long and soundly."

With a sharp gasp she sucked in her breath along with her lower lip.

"*Ahem...* I'm afraid that when you chew your lip that way, it has the same effect on me." He leaned toward her. Not much, just a little. Just enough to make her pulse jump.

"Would you...um, like me to kiss you, perchance?" He raised his brows on the question.

Her brows drew together in a scowl. Her lips narrowed into a tight line. "No, thank you."

“Ah.” He sat back with a small sigh. “A pity, but as you wish, my lady. If you change your mind—”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

He inclined his head in a small bow. “Very well. Just know that if you desire a kiss—or several even—I’ve plenty to give. You have but to ask, my lady.”

The formality of his tone coupled with a slight twitching of his lips implied he was doing his best not to laugh, which aggravated her all the more.

“I’m no lady,” she said grumpily.

Tossing courtly manners aside Roland let out a low laugh and gave her a grin that curled her toes. “With regards to certain activities, I shall be most glad if you are not.”

“And just what the hell is that supposed to mean?” She grabbed the tankard away from him and took a long swallow, wished it were wine. God, she needed a drink. She was suddenly trembling so hard she had to use both hands to keep from spilling the water.

Roland’s hands closed over hers to help steady the tankard. The gesture had the opposite effect. At the solid warmth of his grip, she trembled harder, found herself wondering what his hands would feel like elsewhere on her. A very scary thought. And very unlike her. That’s what made it so scary.

He leaned in till his face was scant inches from hers, till she could feel his breath as he spoke, feel the heat of his eyes as he gazed into hers.

“It means, my sweet Marian, that however it happened, we *are* married, and as such, there are certain...*duties* we must perform together. The getting of an heir, in particular. You understand?”

She did. Too well. More than he could possibly imagine. She also understood that in these days the heirs were often stillborn or never survived infancy, and their mothers often died bearing them. Men had the easy part, darn it. Roland was asking her to lay her life on the line for the sake of his family’s succession.

And, heaven help her, at that moment it didn’t seem like such a bad idea. The husky timbre of his voice mesmerized her, made it all sound so simple, so... possible. Even for her. She felt the energy radiating from him like a tangible force, his body so close, almost touching but not quite.

What *would* it be like to touch him, to lay with him? To feel him pressed against her and into her? To experience sex the way it should be, not the way she’d been taught it. For just once in her life to see if there was such a thing as real, honest-to-goodness lovemaking. And share it not with a faceless phantom in a dream, but a real, honest-to-goodness flesh and blood man.

Could she?

Suddenly she was so tempted to find out.

His eyes never leaving hers, he stroked over her hands and wrists, up her bare arms to her shoulders and down again, soft and slow. Once. Twice. Three times...

Marian’s hands tightened on the tankard in convulsive response. Heat shivered up and down her spine. Her muscle aches dissolved in a tingling rush of adrenaline, only to be replaced by a new ache, a throbbing deep inside. A void opening, spreading, needing to be filled.

Roland continued speaking as he moved in closer, broadening the field of his exploration to include her neck and back, carefully working his way inward and to the front, his fingertips licking her like flames. He took his time, making sure they both savored every stroke, making every caress count.

His lips drifted toward hers, one tiny fraction of an inch at a time. She sat fascinated by the torturously slow approach of his mouth—almost as fascinating as the bulge growing beneath the folds of his robe. Growing and growing...

"I see no reason why our duty cannot be pleasurable." The words were anti-climactic at this point, but she let him talk because the velvety sound of his voice was a sensual experience all its own. "I, for one, intend to enjoy my part of the bargain to the fullest. And I promise I shall do all in my power to make sure it is likewise sweet for you, my maid."

My maid...

Marian wished he hadn't said that. Such a simple thing, but it meant so much to her. She was only one man's "Maid"—and that man wasn't Roland. She didn't know whether to curse him or thank him for reminding her.

As his lips grazed hers, she upended the contents of the tankard, spilling icy water into the center of his lap. Roland jerked to his feet, coughing and sputtering like she'd dumped the water on his head. Which, in manner of speaking, she had.

"I sincerely hope that was an accident," he choked out.

She gave a harsh laugh. "Hah! This whole stupid charade is an *accident*. Everything!" Her being here was an accident, their marriage last night—

She stopped and stared, frantic-eyed, frozen, seeing not Roland or the room, but visions from the previous night. A phantom stepping out of the smoke. A man stepping out of her dreams...

She squeezed her eyes shut, her whole body tensing. Her hands clenched. Oh God, what *had* she seen? *Who* had she seen? And what the hell had she almost done? A wave of nausea struck her. She crumpled into the bed, rolled over and buried her face in the pillow, battling back the old panic, trying to stop the tears, having little luck with any of it.

"Marian?"

She heard the concern in his voice, sensed him staring at her. His hand touched her shoulder and she flinched away, unable to look at or speak to him. A few minutes earlier she'd welcomed his touch. Impossible to believe now.

What was I thinking? A few minutes attraction to Roland was a drop in the ocean compared to a lifetime of loving Robin.

She curled up fetal, frustration driving her into a tight ball. This was too bloody ironic. What if Robin Hood—her Robin—*was* real, was *here*, and she'd missed her chance with him by being married to Roland? That was the worst accident of all. She almost wished Sir Guy's knife had hit her.

Chapter 9

Roland made a sound deep in his throat, something between a growl and a groan.

“Marian—” He broke off in a harsh sigh and shook out his robe, spraying water all over the room. Some of it hit her bare shoulders. Busy battling tears, she scarcely noticed. Then, suddenly, he was sitting on the bed, leaning over her, holding her upper arms. She felt his breath on her back. Slowly, deliberately, he began licking off each separate drop from her skin.

She noticed that. A lot. Her sobbing slammed on the brakes and crashed her straight into a case of hiccoughs. Her shoulders twitched with each hot touch of his tongue. She clenched her teeth to keep from squealing.

“You know,” he said between licks, “a simple ‘no’ or ‘stop’ would have sufficed. There was no need to...drown me.”

No, she hadn’t known. Why should she? Those words had never helped her before. Usually they’d made things worse.

“I-I’m sorry.” She gasped as his tongue captured another droplet. He planted a light kiss where it had been. Merciful heavens, that felt...really good.

Which was probably very bad.

“Please s-stop.” She punctuated the request with a hiccough.

Roland stopped.

It worked?

He sat back, took hold of her shoulders and turned her over to face him. “There, you see how simple it is?”

Marian hiccoughed again.

“I’ll assume that means yes.” His smile flashed briefly, wry and regretful. “If it helps you to hear it, I’m sorry also.”

Carefully he took one of her hands, brought it to his lips and kissed it.

A warm shiver shot up her arm. Her hand curled into a fist and she pulled it away, snatched the covers up high under her chin, and lay there watching him. Wary, waiting...

And hiccoughing. *Rats.*

“I’m sorry for the way of our wedding—how I pressed it upon you. I’d do the whole thing over and differently if I could. But ’tis done and nothing can undo it now.” His eyes searched hers. “Is this marriage truly so bad?”

Who is he asking? Me? Or himself?

“It’s certainly bad for you,” she countered. *Unless he didn’t know yet?* “Um, you’ve heard about Elaine—*hic*—and Allan?”

“That she’s alive? And married? Yes. I...ah, heard the story this morn. It seems Allan plans on taking her to his home in Wales. I hope they’ll be very happy together.” His gaze lowered. “I had hoped we could be happy as well.”

“Why, for heaven’s sake?” This made no sense. Medieval marriages were rarely based on happiness—not among the upper crust. They were all about money and political alliances. As a wife she offered him neither now, and he knew it.

Her brow wrinkled in confusion. “You’ve lost her—*hic*—dowry. I should think you’d be happy to be rid of me.”

Hmm, was he deliberately avoiding her gaze? If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was hiding something. Her eyes narrowed.

His raised again, a curious expression in them, hard and soft at the same time. “I...” He paused to cough. “I don’t care about the damn dowry. I never did.

And I should be most *unhappy* to be rid of you.”

“Oh.” This really made no sense. And he *was* hiding something, she could sense it. Honestly, the man was like a Chinese puzzle box. She couldn’t figure what was inside, or how to open him to find out. No, scratch that. She didn’t *want* to know what was in him. If he had secrets, he could keep them that way. She had enough secrets of her own. She couldn’t deal with anyone else’s. Couldn’t deal with how he was looking at her either. She closed her eyes to block out the sight of him.

The room suddenly felt hot and stuffy. Her skin felt flushed, but it had nothing to do with the blanket covering her—just the enigmatic Earl of Hunterdon and his enigmatic black eyes. When he looked at her like this she felt like she was slow roasting over hot coals. *Damn*. Through sheer nerves, her hiccoughs increased to a rapid-fire spate of spasms.

“*Hic, hic, hic...*” She bounced on the bed with each one. Geeze, this was getting monotonous. She couldn’t catch her breath and the bouncing made her seasick. Like she didn’t have enough problems already. *Double damn*.

Without warning two hands cupped her face, anchoring her between them. Two lips connected with hers.

“*Mmph!*” Marian’s back arched with the impact. Her toes curled; her fingers stretched wide. She almost heard her hair crackle. Just a simple, straightforward kiss, mouth pressing firmly on mouth, but it hit like a bolt of lightning—sizzled down her spine—startled the hiccoughs right out of her.

She blinked up in a daze, seeing stars circling her head...and Roland as he released her and sat back, an incorrigibly satisfied grin on his handsome face.

“Better?” he asked.

“Um...no...not exactly.”

She suddenly had a whole new problem. And no time to ponder it.

“Well!” a third voice sounded, snapping through the tension in the room like the crack of a whip.

Marian winced. So did Roland. Both stared at the door to see it swung back and a towering burly figure filling the opening, eyes blazing, massive bosom heaving with righteous indignation.

Nurse Godgifu.

“She never knocks.” Roland sighed. “One would think she was the earl and not me.”

Godgifu pursed her lips at him. “And just what do ye think *ye’re* doing here, m’lord?”

He rose from the bed to face her with his full lordly authority. “I live here. Remember?”

He leveled a quelling glare upon her.

She wasn’t quelled. The woman stood nearly as tall as he and twice as broad.

“Aye, I remember. I also remember telling ye to leave yer lady rest. Her out in the damp air all night, carried home half dead this morn. D’ye want her to catch a fever or the pox?”

She looked sternly down her nose at him.

Roland tried to appear as though butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, that he was in complete control of the situation. Crapped out on both counts.

“I...um, was merely offering aid. Lady Marian suffered an attack of hiccoughs. ’Twas most discomfiting. We were...ah...trying a new cure.”

Godgifu’s nose raised another inch. “Looked to me like ye were kissing her, it did.”

"That was the cure." He flashed a quick glance at Marian over his shoulder and gave her a wink.

She blushed and wished she could pull the covers over her head.

"It seems to have worked," he added.

"Mmm-hmm." The nurse sounded ominous. "Seems to have heated her a fever as well."

"'Twould have been a poor kiss if it hadn't," Roland said.

Godgifu looked like she wanted to pop him one. Watching the proceedings with interest, Marian half hoped she would, if only on general principle.

"She needs not *that* kind of fever. Not now, in broad day. 'Tain't decent." The old woman crossed her arms over her chest, a tricky maneuver, considering her chest's size. "Ye'd do best to save such *cures* for night, m'lord. As 'tis *proper*." She hissed out the words. "Why, a babe conceived by daylight could come out with... with sunspots, it could."

Roland blinked, coughed. "Sunspots? What are you talking about?"

Her eyes narrowed into slits. "Ye'd *not* want to find out. Just ye heed my words, or pay the price."

She surveyed Marian with a practiced eye.

"Ah, been weeping, too, by the look of her, poor lamb. Ne'er ye fear, m'lady. I've brought ye some soothing willow bark tea and a nice stout stew. We'll send yer lord on his way so ye can eat in peace. Randy beasts, men—all of 'em, be they highborn or low. Have to watch 'em like hawks ye do." She clucked her tongue.

Marian began to like the woman.

"Do you see what I have to put up with?" Roland asked her. "Always spewing forth dire predictions. I think she invents them on a whim, to suit her own purposes."

Godgifu pushed past him into the room, leading with her stupendous bosom. "Ye mind yer duties, m'lord, and I'll mind mine. The ladies and children of this house *be* my purpose. Ye want yer babes birthed healthy, ye'll do as I say."

"Do I have a choice?" he muttered.

"Nay," she said, then hollered through the door, "Hodge... Where is the lazy lad? Hodge! Bring in that tray and set it on the table by the bed. Quickly!"

Hodge scurried in on trembling legs and did as he was bid, then raced out again, beyond the line of fire.

"Everyone's afraid of her," Roland told Marian, shaking his head.

"Including you, it seems." She felt her heart hitch at his answering look. He gazed down tenderly—too tenderly—setting off strange stirrings within her, like the flutter of butterfly wings.

"Especially me." He grinned, increasing her flutters. "She nursed me through boils when I was a lad. Ghastly. The treatment was worse than the ailment. I still have nightmares about it."

"Cured ye though, I did. And 'tweren't easy, neither, with all the fuss ye made," Godgifu said. "They was on his bum," she explained to Marian before planting her evil eye back on Roland. "And if he don't get himself hence, I'll make a charm to put 'em back there."

He threw up his hands. "All right, I'm leaving. Lady..." He looked at Marian and his expression softened. "Enjoy your rest and your meal. I shall see you anon."

Yeah, that's what she was afraid of. She blushed again as he smiled and dipped a small bow before her. Then he turned and headed for the door.

“*Oof!*” He collided with Cymrica on her way in, a chattering whirlwind with black braids.

Where *did* the girl get her energy? Marian watched brother grab sister to keep her from toppling backward at the impact.

“Roland! There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you. I have something for— Ew, you’re wet.” Cymrica shoved away, her gaze traveling down the length of his robe. Her brows rose at the water spot just below his belt. “What happened, could you not make it to the privy in time?”

Her eyes slanted slyly up to his and she gave him an angelic smile.

“Wench.” He aimed a swat at her backside as she ducked past him and darted to safety between Godgifu and the bedside table.

“Speak gently to me or I shan’t give you the letter I have for you,” she said, peeking out from behind the nurse.

Roland’s eyes went wary. “What letter?”

“Elaine’s letter, of course. The one she promised to write for you, about Marian and—”

“Give it to me later. I...ah...I’ve just remembered I’ve a pressing matter to attend to. Straight away.” He stepped into the outer chamber and reached to close the door behind him.

In a blasted hurry all of a sudden, wasn’t he?

“Wait!” Marian froze him in mid-reach.

Cymrica glanced at her. “Oh, you’re awake at last. I’m so glad. How are you feeling?” Without waiting for an answer she turned to examine the contents of the tray on the table, lifting the covers off the bowls and sniffing. “Ick, willow bark tea.” She grimaced and sniffed the other bowl. Her face lit up. “Ah, pheasant, my favorite.” With her fingers, she fished out a chunk of meat from the stew and popped it into her mouth.

Godgifu slapped her hand away as she tried for seconds. “That be for Lady Marian. Ye’ve already had yer breakfast.”

“That was hours ago,” Cymrica complained.

Roland tried to slip out again while the two argued.

“*What* did Elaine write about me?” Marian called after him.

His shoulders heaved with a dramatic sigh and he stepped back into the bedchamber.

“Um...how should I know? I’ve not even seen the letter yet.” He shot his sister a warning look.

If Cymrica understood the warning, she ignored it. “It simply states what you told us last night when you first arrived here. Elaine has written a letter to Roland—dated last week, by the way—saying that you *are* her twin, that you were lost at birth and only recently discovered, and that she was expecting you to soon join her. ’Twill be proof enough, she thinks, for her dowry to pass to you. She wishes you and Roland to have it. Elaine said ’tis the least she can do after you risked your life to help her.”

“She said that, did she?” Marian’s lips tightened into a narrow line. Her gaze caught Roland’s. “You knew about this?”

“Well...um...I...” he stammered.

“Of course he knew.” Cymrica acted blissfully oblivious of the sudden tension crackling in the chamber. “He and Elaine and Allan discussed it together this morning after we carried you in. ’Twas Elaine and Allan who helped us bring you back here, you know.”

"No, I didn't," Marian murmured. *But I should have.* No wonder Roland was so adamant about holding her to their marriage.

Her eyes bore into his. *I thought you said you didn't care about the dowry,* her expression told him.

His expression said, *Help.*

"'Tis not as though Elaine can use the dowry herself," Cymrica continued.

Marian's attention shifted to her. "Why not?"

"Because the dead have no need for dowries. Elaine has decided to kill herself," the girl explained cheerfully. "Oh, not really," she added when Marian's eyes bugged. "She merely plays dead. For Allan's sake. If 'twere known she's married him, the king might well arrange some mishap to befall him, so he could wed her to a higher bidder. 'Tis unlikely His Highness would be happy for such as Allan to have charge of her. Since she was thought dead once already, the safest course is for her to remain so. Thus she's left 'Lady Elaine' behind and will live with Allan in Wales as a simple soldier's wife. She said she cares not so long as they stay together. 'Tis most brave of her, do you not agree?"

Marian did, as a matter of fact, but she was surprised to hear Cymrica say so. Quite an attitude change from the previous night. The girl was in remarkably blithesome spirits today, wasn't she? What brought this on?

"Yes," she agreed. "But what about the men who saw her alive last night? What if they tell?"

"Those fools? Hah!" Cymrica snorted and popped another piece of pheasant into her mouth while Godgifu's back was turned. "They were all too drunk or too frightened to know what they saw. At worst, they'll think the wood-devils carried her off last night and ate her or some such thing."

Marian paled.

Roland coughed.

And Godgifu turned round and yanked one of the girl's braids. "Mind your mouth."

"Ow." Cymrica rubbed her head. "I merely said what's true. The only one we'd have needed to worry about was the sheriff, and he'll not be talking to anyone. They found him last night with his throat cut. Messy business—blood all over. Marian, did you know he was dead?"

Marian went from white to pale green. "Know it?" Hysterical laughter bubbled out. "I—"

Before she could finish, Godgifu yanked Cymrica's other braid. "Hush!"

"Ow." The girl rubbed her head anew. "What did I do now?"

"Ye gabble like a magpie," Godgifu said.

"I do not! Well, perhaps I do...sometimes. But that's hardly reason for snatching a person bald, is it?" She made wounded cow eyes at the nurse. "I'm just saying what I heard—about the blood, I mean. I ne'er saw the body myself, though I'd have loved to. I've ne'er seen anyone with their throat cut before, least of all one who deserved it as much as Nottingham—Ow! You old witch." She ducked to avoid another yank. "What I really want to know is who killed him. They say 'twas the devils, but I'll not believe it. To kill him in a fair fight, perchance. But I can't think they'd murder him."

"Me neither," Marian rasped out. "It—"

"Ah-ha!" Cymrica cut her off. "You see, I'm not the only one. Marian thinks they're innocent, too."

She smiled triumphantly.

Roland did not. “Hardly innocent, little sister. They’ve disrupted Sherwood for years with their thieving.”

She sniffed. “Everyone knows they only steal from people who can afford to lose it.”

“That hardly makes it less of a theft,” he countered. “Since when have you become their advocate?”

“I...I’m not. But you have to admit, they did help Allan and Elaine. And Marian and me.” She glared defiantly.

He leveled a cool look back. “They could just as easily have killed you. You were lucky is all. And even luckier I’ve not had you whipped for your folly last night.”

“Oh, pooh. You never whip anyone.”

“Continue the path you’re on, wench, and you’ll have the honor of being the first. What makes you think that raid was for your benefit? ’Tis more likely they attacked Gisbourne out of spite and mischief. The devils delight in havoc.”

Cymrica lowered her gaze to a half-lidded, secretive stare. “You believe what you want. But I’m not so sure they *are* devils...at least not nasty ones. A bit naughty perhaps.”

Her lips twitched into a tiny grin. Her eyes took on a dreamy cast.

“Devils to some, angels to others,” Godgifu murmured as though she were reciting a prophecy.

Marian wished the old woman would explain that statement, but didn’t dare ask her to in front of Roland. It was obvious, anyway, what it meant—fit in quite neatly, in fact, with her own recently formed theory on the subject. That the “wood-devils” were Robin Hood’s band, his “merrie men.” Though if those disguises were Robin’s idea of merrie, he had a very warped sense of humor—whoever he was. And if he was real. She had a new theory about that, too, but it was so far-fetched even she, the crazy dream-queen, couldn’t believe it.

A snort sounded at Godgifu’s words. Roland. He stood, aristocratic nose in the air, his mouth curled at one corner, looking poised and collected again—maybe even a trifle bored. Definitely cynical. The autocratic earl was back. Marvy.

He’d hardly thank her now for telling who killed the sheriff. Hell, there was no way they could pin it on Gisbourne, anyway, if she was the only witness. To do so they’d have to publicly admit she’d been there, and *why*. Which would not only blow Allan and Elaine’s cover, but also ruin any chance the Hunterdons had at the dowry. Roland wouldn’t like that at all, would he?

Marian studied him as his gaze flicked from Cymrica to Godgifu. He seemed to have recovered from his embarrassment over being caught out on that damn dowry. Well, why not? He held all the cards and he knew it. It hardly mattered what she thought.

His hooded gaze landed on her for an instant and she felt those nerve-racking butterflies again. She remembered his kiss—suddenly remembered too much—wished they’d all just leave her alone so she could try to sort it out.

What *did* she think? That the Robin Hood myth was founded in truth, after all? Yeah, it seemed so. But there was more to it than that. A lot more. What was the real truth here? The whole truth. These wood-devils weren’t the green-clad outlaws of the legends. They might not be outlaws at all, not exactly. Their wearing such elaborate disguises implied they needed to keep their true identities hidden, which suggested they might be something more along the lines of a vigilante force. Some sort of secret Peasant Power group? An unusual concept for this cast-structured time period. Which made the whole thing even more confusing. And what about Robin?

Her eyes slanted to Roland, who'd started a hushed discussion with his sister by the door. Cymrica handed him a sealed parchment packet, Elaine's letter probably. Marian's brow wrinkled. Come to think of it, she hadn't heard anyone mention Robin Hood himself yet. Not here, not at the castle last night. But hadn't Orlando spouted off about him on the road yesterday?

Yes, and it was right after that Sir Guy's band turned tail and ran. Which meant they recognized Robin's name, and it packed a wallop. Marian wondered what kind of reaction she'd get if she said his name now.

She never got the chance to find out.

A blast of trumpets suddenly sounded from the grounds in front of the manor house, mingled with the clatter of horses and men. The noise of an armed company riding in.

Everyone in the chamber jerked to attention.

Marian sat bolt upright in bed, forgetting her unclad state and letting the covers fall to her lap.

Godgifu squawked, pushed her back down, and yanked the sheet up to her nostrils. The scandalized nurse turned a blistering eye on her lord to see if he'd witnessed his lady's disgrace. Marian had the feeling Godgifu would smack him if he had. But Lord Roland seemed oblivious of the show he'd just missed. He crossed the room in several long strides to stare out the window, Cymrica scampering on his heels.

"God's ribs," he cursed. "That's the king's standard."

"Mind yer mouth, m'lord," Godgifu chastised him as only someone who'd treated boils on his bum would be able to get away with.

Cymrica squashed her nose against the pane for a closer look. "I thought His Highness was not due to arrive till the morrow at earliest."

King John had been due here? *The* King John? And no one warned her? Marian couldn't help feeling miffed. She might not *want* to be the Lady of the Manor, but since she was, you'd think they'd keep her posted on little details like this. Sheesh.

"It appears he made better speed than expected," Roland said, sounding not happy about it. He stepped back from the window. "Ah well, no help for it now. I'd best see to the welcome."

Squaring his shoulders he did an about-face and marched to the door. Then abruptly turned and headed for the bed, a determined glint in his eye.

"Stop right there, m'lord." Godgifu flung up her hand to block him.

Roland grabbed it, pulled her forward and past him and out of the way. Before Marian knew what hit her, she was hauled off the pillow and against his chest. His arms locked her in place. His mouth closed over hers. She stiffened a second, then melted like butter as his tongue slid between her lips, pressed against her teeth, teased her open to a full, hot, wet kiss—probing, tasting, sucking, savoring, eating her alive. She moaned when he released her and she hit the bed with a bounce.

"That was for luck," he said, then swiveled and strode out the door.

Godgifu clucked angrily while Cymrica stifled a giggle behind her hand.

Marian lay panting, fighting to regain her breath.

Luck? He'd need it. They all would. If the history books she'd read were even half correct, a visit from King John was likely to be a royal pain in the ass for the entire household.

Chapter 10

The next morning dawned cloudy and cool, the end of summer in Sherwood, a smell of autumn in the air. Across the Hunterdon grounds could be seen the edge of the forest, its ancient trees shrouded in morning mist—not unlike Marian’s mind at the moment. The manor had been turned upside down to accommodate King John and his entourage, the wedding banquet expanded into a state affair. A trying night, to say the least, bringing too many questions and too little sleep. On top of which, she had one hell of a headache and a sore throat.

Along with the other women of the household, she stood now in front of the manor, feeling pale and pinched, watching the royal company make ready to depart—hopefully soon. A dozen yards off Roland engaged in some final consultation with the king. Her gaze narrowed at them. Hmm, she’d like to *consult* with Lord Roland herself about a few things.

Beside her, Lady Isolde clasped plump, beringed hands together and quietly bemoaned the generous donation of Hunterdon gold that was leaving with His Highness, while Solemnia hovered by Isolde’s elbow, giggling. But then, Solemnia always did that. Cymrica stood with pursed lips and arched brows, casting suspicious glances at Godgifu, who blinked and blushed and, for once, had little to say about anything. Marian knew why, but was in no mood to say anything either. Visions of the previous night filled her head, dreamlike but inescapable. Shivering in the damp morning air, she closed her eyes and remembered...

The glint of gold plate, the sparkle of jewels, rich textured tapestry-hung walls... A crackling glow from the central hearth and the flickering dance of candle flames chasing the dark into corners... Long trestle tables laid out in rows, covered with gleaming cloths... Serving men scurrying between them, carrying flagons and ewers and bowls, platters heaped high with savories and sweets... The fanfare of trumpets as each course was carried in... Courtiers in bold costumes, shouting bold speeches...

* * *

Ceremonial pageantry!

Sensory overload with a vengeance.

The great hall of Hunterdon Manor swam with sound, smells, and color. So did Marian’s head. ’Twas a migraine in the making—otherwise known as an authentic Medieval Feast. Loud, gaudy, dripping with opulence. Too much food, too much drink, way too many people. A severe deficit of table manners.

Her stomach twisted as a man at the table directly in front of her spat out a mouthful of gristle and scrubbed his teeth with the edge of the tablecloth. Her nose wrinkled at the odors. The Hunterdons themselves, she’d noticed, maintained a surprising level of cleanliness for their time, but the king’s company had been on horseback all day and smelled like it. The pungent aromas of spices and cooked meats warred with the reek of sweaty male bodies. Wine and beer breath abounded.

The elaborate pomp of the banquet’s beginning had degenerated into drunken revelry, much of it at her and Roland’s expense as the prominently displayed newlyweds. King John—middle-aged, stocky, and florid of face—laughed heartily at each ribald jest and bawdy innuendo, drank every toast to the bride’s charms. He attacked the capons on his plate with gusto, singing flowery praises to “tender breasts” and “sweet juicy thighs.”

Marian wasn't fooled. He looked at her when he made the comments, not his serving of fowl. Figured. The histories she'd read of him had been of two minds, some saying he was a bad king, some that he'd been saddled with bad circumstances. However, they all agreed on one thing—when it came to his nobles' women, King John had real problems keeping it in his pants. A pity the histories were proving so correct.

The further the feast progressed, the more it appeared he expected her to be his dessert—perhaps in payment for his willingness to accept her as his ward's twin. He'd taken the news of Elaine's "death" quite calmly, in fact, being that it was buffered by the added news Elaine was survived by a recently discovered sister. 'Twas such a comfort, he'd said.

Not to me, Marian had thought.

John and Roland had arranged the dowry transfer between them during the first course. Darned if the sheriff hadn't pegged that right. John was happy to have Elaine's property remain in English hands—especially when those hands already held so much other property of various and sundry sorts. He had, apparently, long coveted this alliance with the Hunterdons, or their affluence at any rate. Whether the alliance was made with one sister or the other seemed a moot point. Since Roland's delay in marrying Elaine had been wearing on the royal nerves, his speed in taking the "twin" was much appreciated. John was pleased. Marian was glad someone was.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she whispered to Cymrica seated beside her.

Lord Roland, seated on her other side, seemed not to notice the royal personage leering at her. Very tactful of Lord Roland. He was dutifully getting drunk with the rest of the men—mayhap to aid his tact. After all, there wasn't a hell of a lot he could do to protect her in this situation. Marian supposed she couldn't blame him for not even trying. Not that she planned to forgive him for it either.

Cymrica grabbed her hand under the table, looking woefully sympathetic and a bit green around the gills herself. The girl had her own problem, one who looked like he'd fallen straight out of a deck of playing cards. Very much the Knave of Hearts. He certainly seemed to have stolen Cymrica's.

The minstrel had arrived at the manor midway through the feasting, begging leave to entertain. A lithesome blond fellow in gaily colored tunic and hose, with a scarlet feathered cap on his head, a neat beard and mustache framing his smile, and a sleepy droop to his hazel eyes, like he spent a good part of his life in bed—probably not alone. He stood before the high table, strumming his lute with a deft hand and warbling lays of gallantry and courtly love. He gave a whole new dimension to the musical term "lay," in fact.

"He sings like an angel!" shouted one of John's men, looking well pleased with the performance.

Lady Isolde fluttered her lashes. "And kisses like a devil, no?"

She looked as though she'd be pleased to test that theory.

Cymrica looked not pleased about anything. She hunched over in a sudden fit of choking, covering her mouth with both hands.

Leaning close to pound her on the back, Marian saw the girl's gaze dart warily to the minstrel. He returned the look with a grin and a wink. Cymrica blushed, groaned, and hid her face behind her hands. A bit dramatic even for her.

"What is the matter with you?" Marian hissed in her ear.

"I doubt you really want to know, but I'd best tell you. I cannot tell anyone else." Cymrica spread two fingers to peek out at her with one tragic eye. "He was at the fortress last night. When I heard the rout, I ran back inside to find you. Instead, I

found myself trapped in a crush of Sir Guy's men. Yon minstrel pulled me free of them. He does kiss like a devil," she said in a tiny, breathy voice that only Marian could hear.

At least Marian hoped she was the only one who heard. *Gads*. Well, this explained why Cymrica recovered from the loss of Allan so quickly, but it was a dangerous confession, especially with the king in earshot. John had already been quizzing Roland on the area's troublesome wood-devils. It seemed that too many of his revenues had been disappearing into the forest recently. The royal person was not happy about that.

She glanced at the minstrel, felt a chill run down her spine. "I suppose it's too much to hope that he was there before the rout started—at the castle, I mean. Maybe he was only there as a minstrel?" she whispered to Cymrica.

The girl dropped her hands from her face and gave her a "get real" look. "He was wearing *antlers*," she whispered back, chancing another glance at the man. Her expression went thoughtful. "He calls himself Will Scarlet. I wondered why, but mayhap 'tis for the red feather he wears in his cap."

"Mayhap." Marian cared squat about the why. The only thing that mattered was that "Will Scarlet" was a name straight out of Robin Hood lore. More evidence he and his band existed. She heaved a deep sigh, feeling sicker than ever. The worst of this was, she'd already been thinking Will looked familiar, that she'd seen him before. Only not at Sir Guy's and not in antlers. It had been earlier, sometime between when she'd passed out on the road and awoken in front of the manor. Sometime during her dream? The dream she couldn't remember?

She gave herself an inward shake. No, that wasn't true, not anymore. She was no longer certain it had been a dream. And she *was* beginning to remember it—a little—just vague bits and pieces drifting out of the back of her mind like wisps of smoke. The half-memories had started the moment Roland kissed her, that first kiss. The pressure of his lips on hers had triggered something. As if...she'd felt his kiss before?

Ridiculous. Kisses weren't like fingerprints. They weren't a person's signature. She couldn't be sure what she'd felt or was feeling, couldn't be sure of anything. Very likely the time-jump had disoriented her whole system. Leaping eight centuries into the past must take a heavy toll on a person. And she'd taken a knock on the head, too—as though her brains weren't already rattled enough. Add to that all she'd been through since crash-landing here, and the fact that it all happened in...

What? Just a little over a day? Such a short time?

Grief on a stick, it was a miracle she wasn't a babbling idiot by now. Though perhaps she was if she'd seriously been wondering—

But why not? She knew Robin's band acted in secret, didn't she? Those bizarre disguises and all. New evidence stood before her in the form of Will Scarlet. And Robin himself wore that darn hood pulled so low you couldn't tell who was inside it. He could be anyone. Even...

She tensed. Her gaze slanted sideways to Roland as he conversed with the king. Just for one second, just for the sake of argument, she allowed herself to consider the idea. Aristocrat by day, outlaw by night. Was it really so impossible?

Yes, damn it. This wasn't the comics where characters juggled heroics with secret identities. As special as he was, Robin wasn't Superman, and Roland was no Clark Kent.

Look at him sitting there swilling wine and buttering up the Grand Poobah.

He'd been ignoring her this evening, devoting all his attention to the king. And doing a smart job of it—obviously knew the game and how to play it. Smooth, scholarly, properly deferential to His Royalness, almost fastidious compared to the rest of this crowd. Lord Roland was pure medieval sophisticate, had "statecraft" written all over him in big bold letters. Even drunk, his diplomatic skills seemed considerable. Definitely the-pen-is-mightier-than-the-sword type. He had deadly aim, but he shot words, not arrows. She just couldn't picture him skulking about nights in a hood.

More importantly, he was an earl. A *wealthy* earl. He'd have nothing to gain by playing Robin Hood, and everything to lose if he were found out. Not only would he be executed in disgrace, but the whole Hunterdon family could be ruined as well. Roland would never take that chance. The man had his faults, but stupidity wasn't one of them.

He was up to something though.

What? She cocked an ear, trying to block out the din of the hall so she could hear his discussion with the king. Her chest tightened when she realized they'd returned to the subject of wood-devils.

Oh, joy. John was sharing news that a messenger had recently brought him. Marian had seen that messenger run in and out of the hall earlier, and wondered what the man whispered in the king's ear. No doubt Roland had wondered, too. They were both finding out now, and it wasn't pretty.

It seemed the sheriff wasn't the only casualty of the previous night. While digging through the rubble of the castle's wards, Sir Guy had unearthed a wounded wood-devil. A small one.

"'Tis most interesting." John leaned back in his chair and folded his royal hands over his royal middle, regarded Roland over his royal nose. "The creature was discovered to be *not* a devil, but a bandy-legged little man wearing a wolf's head and tail. Imagine that. He's been identified as one called 'Mutch the Miller's Son,' but he claims not to know how he came to be at Gisbourne's—swears he was captured by the devils and bewitched. He thanked Sir Guy for breaking the spell upon him."

The king twiddled his thumbs together, contemplating that. "I'm afraid Sir Guy is loathe to believe him. He's hung the fellow in chains from the battlements and suggested he rethink his story. If Mutch cannot tell a better one by morn, he'll be stretched on the rack. 'Twould seem he could do with a bit more length anyway."

John chuckled at his own joke.

So did every courtier in hearing distance. Roland laughed the loudest of all. He lifted his wine cup in a toast to the royal wit, and downed its contents.

Marian wanted to grab it out of his hands and club him over the head with it. There was such a thing as too much *diplomacy*, damn him. She'd thought he was better than this. Why did it hurt so much to realize she'd been wrong? Tears stinging her eyes, she reached for her own wine. She obviously hadn't had nearly enough to drink yet. 'Twas time to get well and truly sloshed.

Her fingers closed over the goblet and she brought it to her lips, then stopped and put it back down. No, she didn't really want a drink. Well, yes, she did want one—a lot. But she didn't *need* one. A shocking revelation. What brought this on?

Maybe she just felt there was enough drinking in the hall already? Maybe she'd decided that someone here needed to keep their senses straight? Or maybe—and this was a scary thought—maybe she was finally starting to accept the idea that drowning her problems in alcohol would never solve any of them. She shivered.

The notion gave her goose bumps, like the prospect of flying without a net. Was she ready for such a leap?

Roland set down his goblet, too, so close to hers that their fingers touched. Marian startled at the contact. She glanced up to see him looking at her, his eyes drooping, his posture sagging, but a worried awareness in his gaze and a tiny flicker of...what? Apology? A plea for understanding, forgiveness?

She suddenly realized how tired he must be, how taxed. Oh hell, who was she to judge? The man was only acting the way he had to, doing what was needed to stay afloat in the shark-infested courtly pool. Even the best of monarchs were difficult to deal with in these days of “divine right”—and King John wasn’t one of the best.

She wished she could tell Roland about the *Magna Carta* John would be hit with soon. It might give him a boost. As a matter of fact, she wished she could tell John about it, too, purely for spite. Boy, was he in for a rude awakening. But she probably shouldn’t warn him. Surprises were more fun.

She reached deep inside herself and found a small smile for Roland instead, just to let him know she appreciated what he was up against. That was all, of course. She didn’t want him to read anymore into it than that, certainly didn’t expect the warmth that curled through her when he smiled in return. His hand still lay next to hers on the table. The backs of his fingers brushed against hers in a feathery caress.

Marian jerked her hand away and lowered her gaze, forced her attention back to what the king said. It seemed His Highness’s main concern of the moment was the appointment of a new sheriff, one who would posthaste rid the area of these meddlesome devils—especially since ’twas clear now they weren’t devils but mere men.

“Sir Guy will soon pry out their names from this Mutch.” John grinned. “’Twill be swift work to round up the band and dispatch the lot of them.”

Pretty confident of that, wasn’t he? Marian wondered. Her gaze shifted to see Cymrica looking as pale as she herself felt. Their eyes met for an instant, then they both darted glances at Will Scarlet. He caught their looks and threw back a knowing wink. Marian’s stomach clenched with fear for him.

“Hah. Sir Guy will soon be a sorry man, I’ll warrant,” Cymrica whispered. “Think you Gisbourne will have another visit tonight from the wood-devils? After what we’ve seen of them, I’ll not believe they’ll leave poor Mutch hanging in his chains.”

“Shh,” Marian hushed her. “You’re going to get us *all* hanging in chains.”

The king knew barely half the story of the rout and even less of the events leading up to it. He certainly didn’t know she or Cymrica had participated—or Elaine, for that matter, since she was supposed to be dead, after all—not unless Sir Guy’s message had enlightened him, which she seriously doubted. What was he going to do, confess the devils attacked him because he’d kidnapped the king’s ward? Hell, there was little Sir Guy could say about any of it without incriminating himself. His courier had probably been as much a spy as a message bearer. He’d be very interested in what Roland might be telling His Highness, wouldn’t he? He’d want to know if any of his crimes were about to catch up with him.

In which case they had a stalemate going, because there wasn’t much Roland could say either, not without losing his shot at the dowry and endangering the dowry’s former owner. Roland had told John the bare minimum. Elaine’s “death” he’d recounted more or less as Marian had first explained it to the Hunterdons, but he’d blamed it on nameless brigands. It would have been difficult

to blame it on Sir Guy and the sheriff without mentioning Allan's part in the event. They needed to keep Allan of Wales clear of this for his and Elaine's safety.

A sudden shiver shot through her at the thought of his name. Another piece of the puzzle fell into place. *Allan of Wales*? Cripes, that sounded a lot like Allan-a-Dale, didn't it? One more character from Robin Hood lore. The mythical Allan-a-Dale was an impoverished young man whose ladylove was being forced to wed a most disgusting knight—on short notice, too. Robin's band helped Allan to marry her instead. And damned if last night they hadn't done just that. A few details had changed with the telling over the years, but the main thrust of the story was the same. The only real difference was that here Allan was a soldier and in the legends he was a minstrel. Which reminded her...

Marian looked at the king to see if he showed any sign of having heard Cymrica, but he was too busy doing his own talking to have noticed anyone else's, thank goodness. He was currently informing Roland that he felt Sir Guy to be a fine candidate for the vacant position.

Sheriff Guy? Ewwww!

His High-and-Mightiness desired Lord Roland's opinion on the matter.

Lord Roland was happy to give it. He answered that he thought Sir Guy a worthy choice.

"Oh, he does not!" Cymrica whispered indignantly. "Roland detests Sir Guy. The Hunterdons and Gisbournes have been feuding forever. They hate us, and we hate them. His Highness must know that." She wrinkled her nose. "He's baiting Roland. I can smell it."

So could Marian, but she wasn't sure who was baiting whom.

Roland finished his recital of Guy's virtues with a by-the-way mention of his financial woes. Not that it had any bearing on his abilities as a warrior, of course, but 'twas such a pity the man's skill at gaming didn't match his skill at arms. It left him so little to work with in the way of funding, poor fellow.

"Ah, is that so?" King John found the news interesting. His gaze landed covetously on the opulent display of Hunterdon plate in the hall. *No lack of funds in this family*, one could read in his eyes.

Marian felt her blood run cold. *No*. They couldn't possibly be considering...

Still, if history was correct, John himself was chronically strapped for cash, and a shrewd ruler gave appointments to those who could pay best for them.

"Bloody hell," Cymrica hissed out under her breath.

The curse coincided with the thud of flesh hitting boards, and raucous guffaws.

Bloody hell, was right. Marian stared in dismay at Roland slumped motionless over the table. He'd just passed out face-first into the plate she'd been sharing with him. Good thing she'd lost her appetite long before.

"He's not used to drinking so much," Cymrica whispered miserably.

Laughing at his weak head for wine, King John gave permission for his host to be carried bodily from the hall and bedded down in his study to sleep it off. The lord's bedchamber, naturally, was John's for the duration of the royal visit.

Marvy. Marian had wondered earlier where Roland would be spending the night. She'd already guessed where she'd end up.

The summons came later, after the banquet, after most had retired. Marian received it in Cymrica's chambers with the other women, only moments after Cymrica had returned from checking on Roland.

"Dead to the world, and snoring like a bear," the girl declared, looking disgusted. "They've put him on a pallet under his desk. Not even a good kick in the

arse roused him.”

Lady Isolde gasped. “*Cherie*, you did not!”

“Kick him? I most definitely did. I’d like to give him worse than that when he awakes, the coward. I’ll warrant even King John has some sense of propriety. I’d not think he’d...um, take liberties right under his host’s nose. Roland should not have passed out and made things so easy for him. How dare he drink himself stupid and leave us so undefended!” Cymrica put her arm protectively around Marian.

Nice of her to want to share the danger, but Marian was pretty sure there was no “us” about it, that she was the only one with cause for concern. It seemed to be the general theme of her life. However did she always get so “lucky”?

She sighed. So did everyone else—except Solemnia who giggled, but that was expected. All present were well acquainted with the royal reputation. Isolde’s sigh was even a bit wistful, as though she had hopes in that direction herself.

When, in the next instant, the royal messenger appeared at the door, informing Lady Marian the king wished a private audience with her, Lady Isolde heroically—and rather eagerly, it must be admitted—begged leave to go in her place.

The flustered courtier, a small mousy man in rich but banquet-bedraggled garb, proved unsure how to react.

“I...I am sorry, my lady, but my orders are most specific. His Highness has...ah, questions regarding this estate. As Lord Roland is...um...currently indisposed, the king feels the lady of the manor is the best one to answer on his b-b-behalf,” he stammered as Isolde closed in, backing him against a wall.

Swish, swish. The Frenchwoman had hips galore and knew how to use them. The poor chap watched mesmerized.

“Nonsense, my lord. Lady Marian is but young, newly come here. The child knows little that would be of service to anyone.” She fluttered her eyelashes in his face.

He gulped and turned beet red. Isolde made a valiant attempt to press home the advantage, which included pressing her breasts against his chest. Very altruistic of her, Marian was sure.

“If the king has *questions*, they should be *answered* by one who *understands* how matters work, no?” Isolde gave new meaning to the words.

Damn, she was good. Was this where Roland had learned it, his trick of saying one thing while implying another? Or was the whole family naturally adept at these multi-level conversations? Odd bunch, the Hunterdons. Marian watched the current game purely to keep her mind off its outcome.

“Surely His Highness would prefer *speech* with a woman of *experience*, yes?” Isolde concluded with a final flutter of her lashes.

“No,” the messenger croaked out. ’Twas clear *he’d* prefer the experience, but the choice wasn’t his. With obvious reluctance he extricated himself from between Isolde’s bosom and the wall. “King John wishes to see Lady Marian and only Lady Marian. I...I am truly sorry.”

He looked it, too.

Marian took pity on him and forced her feet to follow him out the door, feeling like a sacrificial lamb. Cymrica glared daggers at the man while Isolde huffed angrily and Solemnia for once had nary a giggle to spare. Godgiftu, looking grimmer than ever, crossed the threshold on Marian’s heels. The messenger opened his mouth to protest.

“Lead on, m’lord,” the woman cut him off. “Where my lady goeth, *I* go.” She gave him a stare that dared him to stop her.

He didn't try. Just snapped his jaw shut, turned and led.

Smart fellow, Marian thought as Godgifu fell into step beside her. A pity that stare probably wouldn't work on the king.

Together they trailed the unhappy courtier through the manor, stepping over and around drunken bodies the whole way, casualties of the banquet. By the time they'd crossed the courtyard and climbed the stairs to where John lay like a spider waiting for the delivery of his evening's fly, Marian was very sorry she wasn't among the comatose. What on earth had possessed her to cut back on drinking *tonight* of all nights?

The messenger, who'd introduced himself as Lord Clarence of Topham—wherever the hell Topham was—ushered them past the two guards on the landing at the top of the stairs and into the vacant outer chamber. He nodded nervously toward the inner door.

"No need for me to announce you, my lady. You are to enter directly." His gaze shifted to Godgifu and he shook his head. "I've no idea what he'll say about you."

"We'll soon find out, I'll warrant." She crossed her arms over her massive chest.

The man's shoulders sagged with the weight of her glare. "Not 'we.' You will. My duties are accomplished for this eve. His Highness will not expect me to return till morn." He bobbed a small bow to Marian. "I'd...ah...not keep him waiting over long if I were you, my lady."

With that brilliant piece of advice and a doubtful glance at Godgifu, Lord Clarence turned tail and beat a hasty retreat back down to the courtyard, taking the guards on the landing with him and leaving them stationed at the foot of the stairs.

Marian could only assume that was done on royal orders as well. King Hot-to-Trot apparently wanted complete privacy tonight. Not a good sign.

Her nerves stretched tight, she nearly screamed when Godgifu reached for her hand and she felt cold metal pressed into her palm.

The nurse quickly touched a finger to her lips. "Careful. 'Tis for the king, that is," she whispered. "Stir it into his bedtime wine and he'll nay trouble ye, m'lady."

Why the crafty old... Marian gave her startled pulse a second to slow before she peeked at what she held.

A ring, large domed and jeweled. It glittered ominously in the candlelight of the chamber.

"Ye press the red stone to open it," Godgifu said.

Hey, didn't Lucrezia Borgia use something like this? Or she would in another three centuries.

Trembling, Marian slipped it on and offered an experimental push to a ruby on the ring's side. The dome popped up on a tiny hidden hinge, revealing a small mound of grayish powder inside. She clicked it closed again, a horrible thought striking her.

"It...it's not poison, is it?" She'd do a lot to avoid being the royal dessert, but she drew the line at murder.

Godgifu snorted. "Hah, almost wisht i'twere, I do. But, nay, 'twill only snuff his candle for a time—make him sleep like a babe, m'lady."

She leaned close to whisper the instructions. "He'll have wine handy, I dare say, and expect ye to serve it. What ye must do is empty the ring into his cup before ye fill it, then heat his drink with a poker from the fire. 'Tis the only way 'twill mix proper. Mind ye stir the cup slowly and well, and—"

Marian held up her hand. *Wait a minute.* This was getting too complicated. Even if she got the ring open and the powder into the wine without him seeing, she'd never be able to manage the stirring and heating and make it look natural—not with her amazingly unstellar acting skills. And especially not with her insides so rapidly crumbling. John would know she was up to something. What was the penalty for trying to drug a king? Death, probably. It must be a treasonable offense. Refusing his advances would likely be taken as pretty darn offensive, too. Though she had considered it—briefly. That left only submitting to him.

Which was the worst option of all.

"I can't do it." Her whisper sounded like a wraith's in the chill air of the chamber. Dread wrapped round her like chains, holding her frozen.

"M'lady, if I could do it for ye, I would, but—"

A sudden draft swept in from under the door to the inner room, sending the candle flames leaping.

"Why is that window open?" they heard the king complain, and then the swish of curtains and a series of creaks like he was climbing out of bed.

The noises shoved Marian into action. "Will the powder work without wine?"

"What?" Godgifu peered down at her in confusion.

"Never mind, I'll find out for myself." She fumbled with the ring, her hands shaking so much she could barely work it. "You'd better leave now. I don't want you to get into trouble for this."

A muffled plop and a grunt sounded from the other room. She scarcely noticed. *Ahh...* With a satisfying snap, the jeweled dome finally opened. Clever little contraption.

Godgifu's eyes widened. "M'lady, *what* d'ye think ye're doing?"

"If I can't drug the king, I figured I'd try drugging me." Before the nurse could stop her, she tilted back her head and dumped the ring's contents into her mouth.

Ack! Several horrid moments of coughing, gagging and sputtering ensued. Rough stuff. She almost choked to death getting it down.

Godgifu squawked and pounded her on the back.

Marian coughed harder, her eyes watering, and doubled over from the force of the woman's blows.

"Spit it out, m'lady, spit it out! Ye'll burn yer throat taking it dry!"

Now she tells me.

"I...I can't." *Gasp.* "I already s-swallowed it."

"Oh, merciful saints—I'll fetch ye some drink!" Clucking like a frantic mother hen, the Terror of the Hunterdons hustled her bulk to the inner door, full willing to accost the king of England himself for the needed wine. Good old Godgifu. She toppled back with a thunderous crash as the door swung open, knocking her flat to the floor.

Marian struggled to stay on her own feet, the room suddenly tilting and swaying around her. *Wow, that powder packed a punch.* Through fast blurring eyes she stared from Godgifu's unconscious form to the doorway, expecting to see King John standing there.

Oh no... She saw another figure instead, the dark opening of his hood pointing downward to the nurse.

"My apologies, good mother. I appear to have this effect on people tonight. First the king knocked senseless and now you."

Marian heard him through a haze. "And now me," she rasped out, feeling her knees buckle. With a moan, she lost the battle to stay upright and fell forward to be caught in his arms.

"I seem always to have this effect on you, my maid. But I've yet to decide whether 'tis flattering, an insult...or merely damned inconvenient." He gathered her close against his chest. "All I know for sure is how very much I love you. Maid Marian belongs to Robin Hood. Whate'er befalls, remember that. For years I've awaited you. But I'll not wait much longer, sweetheart."

Sighing deeply, he carried her across the chamber and laid her on Hodge's vacant pallet. "Sleep now, and dream of me making love to you...as I shall soon be loving you in truth."

Her last memory was the feel of his lips on hers.

Several hours later she awoke to pale dawn light and a paler Lord Clarence frowning down on her.

"M-my lady," he stammered. "W-what...how...w-where..."

Before he could form a coherent question, a duet of strangling noises issued from the bedchamber—loud and louder.

Uh-oh.

Marian and the courtier exchanged glances. Since he seemed reluctant to take the lead, she hauled herself off the pallet and wobbled on rubbery legs to the interior door. Lord Clarence followed just as she gathered enough courage to crack it open, and together they peeked in. Jaws dropped. The king had just awoken to find Godgifu under the covers with him. 'Twas difficult to tell whether he or the nurse was the more horrified over his apparent change of mind in bed partners the previous night. Clarence's eyes popped and he swiftly shut the door.

"I...I cannot believe it," he whispered.

Neither can John, I'll bet, Marian thought. Hoo boy, someone had a wicked sense of humor to have set this up. Someone who'd better remain nameless.

She managed a weak smile for Clarence. "Um...I guess Lady Isolde isn't the only one with...experience."

"Obviously," he said dryly.

They waited in awkward silence until the door creaked open again and Godgifu stepped through it, holding herself stiff as a board, her eyes staring straight ahead, her right hand fisted against her chest.

"The things I do for this family," she muttered under her breath.

Clarence cleared his throat, tried to say something. Failed.

"Go on in, m'lord," Godgifu told him, her voice stiff as her posture. "He's awaiting ye to attend him."

"Oh. Of c-c-course." Looking more miserable than usual, Lord Clarence dipped his head in a quick bow to Marian and hastened in to his king.

Godgifu waited till the door closed behind him, then slowly opened her fist and blinked down at what it held.

Marian blinked with her. *A broach?* How pretty—shiny silver with a large green gem in the center.

"He gave you a gift?" She tried not to sound as surprised as she felt.

The old woman's mouth quirked up at one corner. "A bribe," she corrected. "Made me promise not to tell, he did."

* * *

A fanfare of trumpets jolted Marian back to the here and now, the manor close behind her, the king's company in front, colors flying, weapons clanking, hooves pounding the earth. In noisy ceremony they cantered off toward the forest

road, richer for their visit by a goodly chunk of Hunterdon gold plate. She was still wondering the why behind that and was afraid of the answer. A few scattered hurrahs rang out as the royal party disappeared beyond the trees, though whether the cheers were meant to Godspeed the king on his way or celebrating the fact he was finally gone, she couldn't tell.

The show over, Isolde and Solemnia turned to re-enter the manor, tutting and giggling respectively. Still silent, Godgifu followed them, absently fingering the green jewel at her neck.

Cymrica stared after her. "Do you know how she came by that broach? She'll not tell me, the old witch."

Before Marian could decide what to answer, a red-feathered cap strolled by, the figure beneath it languorously strumming a lute. He smiled as he passed, and Cymrica's stare melted into a dreamy-eyed daze.

"We can talk later." Breathlessly, she hurried off in pursuit of the feather.

Sir Sigurd narrowly missed being mowed down as she flew past him.

"Everyone's always in such a bleeding rush," he complained. "Even His Highness—here and gone before you can turn 'round and spit. 'Tain't like the old days. Why, when King Henry came for the hunting, he always stayed a fortnight at least. There was a royal soul for you. You'll not find kings like that nay more. People today move too bloody fast. They've nay honor, nay sense of *pro-pri-ety*. I know not what the world's coming to." Grumbling, he shuffled into the house.

Across the front grounds the lines of men who'd assembled to see His Majesty ride off began to waver and disperse. The lines had been wavering already—bleary eyes and aching heads the apparent order of the day—sort of like *Dawn of the Living Dead* in doublet and hose. Anything less and the banquet would doubtless have been declared a failure. Only one Hunterdon man among the several score present stood straight and steady on his feet. Lord Roland, in fact, looked annoyingly healthy this morning, far better than he had a right to, considering he'd been carried out of the hall feet first the night before. He looked almost too good in black hunting gear that fit him like a glove.

When the heck did he get so...so outdoorsy? The scholarly Earl of Hunterdon was no sportsman. Marian's eyes narrowed as she watched him select a small company of men—none of whom seemed wildly enthusiastic at the prospect of any activity beyond collapsing into a corner and nursing their hangovers. Moans and groans sounded as grooms led forward the day's transport and the draftees mounted up.

She stiffened as Roland climbed clumsily aboard a solid black steed, turned and caught her staring at him. He smiled, and her breath hitched—and not just because he nearly fell out of the saddle executing the turn. As awkward as he appeared on the beast, he still looked way too attractive to be let loose on the countryside. His lack of horsemanship was endearing in a way, gave him a vulnerable quality that tugged oddly at her heart. Very unnerving. Up until then, *vulnerable* would've been the last word she'd have used to describe him. How dare he start being cute? The man was difficult enough to deal with as it was.

Her feet moving almost of their own accord, she angled across the yard to meet him as he rode toward her. He reined to a stop as she drew near. His horse glared irritably over its shoulder at him when he jerked a trifle too hard on its mouth.

"My apologies," Roland said dryly in answer to the animal's disgusted snort. His gaze shifted to Marian and his look softened. "My apologies to you also, my lady. I can only tarry a moment. I'm sorry I've had no time for you this morning."

Marian wasn't. She had no idea what she was supposed to say to him after last night anyway, no idea if he'd heard about her royal summons, and no desire to enlighten him if he hadn't. It was just as well this would be a short interview.

"Don't worry about it," she said, her voice hoarse from that wretched sleeping powder. "I could see you were busy with the king." A sudden thought struck her on what their business might have been. "Get everything squared away with the dowry, did you?"

Half of her hoped he hadn't—just on principle and to be perverse. The rest hoped like hell the damn dowry was all they'd discussed. Wishful thinking, of course. A desperate bit of optimism, born of rising panic. She already suspected the truth. Why else would he be prancing around in black like the villain in some gothic melodrama? He was dressed almost like...

Oh God, no... Please no...

He grinned, sending a shiver down her spine, hot and chill at the same time. "The dowry was settled last night, in case you've forgotten. However, I have, this morn, returned it to His Highness—an added gift to go with the plate. I thought you'd be pleased to know that."

Marian choked back a whimper. Under any other circumstances, she'd have been very pleased to know it. But now all she wanted to know was *why*. What had those gifts bought him?

Unfortunately, Roland was only too happy to tell her.

"Congratulations," she rasped out, and stood rooted to the ground as he rode away.

Cymrica found her still frozen to the same spot, staring off into the trees, long after he'd disappeared. "What are you looking at?" she asked, turning to stare with her. "I see nothing."

Neither did Marian. That was the problem. Somewhere out there, deep in the greenwood, was a hooded figure with a bow. She knew now he was no myth, no figment of her imagination. Knew once and for all and for certain that he existed, he was real—a living, breathing, warm-blooded man. A man who loved her. But she couldn't see him, couldn't hear him, couldn't feel him. Maid Marian ought to be off in Sherwood with Robin Hood. Instead, she was stuck here, married to...

She swallowed, painfully, and forced out the news. "Roland is the new Sheriff of Nottingham."

Chapter 11

"The sheriff? So that's why he gifted His Highness so richly. He's bought himself a second title, has he?" Cymrica stared a moment, digesting the news. "Methinks I like that not." Her dark eyes searched Marian's. "Methinks you like it even less."

Perceptive little minx, wasn't she?

"He told me his first order of business is the wood-devils." Bleak words and bleaker thought. "He's under special charge from the king to destroy the band."

"Are you frightened for him?" Cymrica's gaze still probed.

Him? The question caught Marian off guard. She cast a nervous glance toward the line of trees marking the forest's edge. "Um...who do you mean?"

"Roland, of course. The man knows naught but his books. He has as much business playing sheriff as a hare has playing fox."

"Oh." A telltale blush warmed Marian's cheeks. Darn, but the girl was probably right. Granted, if there was any fighting to be done, Roland had men to do it for him. But as sheriff, he'd have to lead those men at least sometimes, wouldn't he? Was she frightened for him?

Yes, she realized with a start. Just thinking of him wounded, or worse, tied her stomach in a knot. Which raised a whole new concern—why she cared about his safety so much. A disconcerting question and one for which she had no answer.

Cymrica's eyes narrowed. "Who did you think I meant? The wood-devils?" She gave a hollow laugh. "Hah. With Roland leading the hunt, they've ne'er been safer."

Marian suddenly wasn't so sure of that.

"Don't sell your brother short. He may be no warrior, but he's no fool either." And this particular hunt would likely be more a battle of brains than brawn. Whoever won, the outcome would be bad. An awful chill swept over her. A once beautiful dream was turning into a nightmare.

"You're shivering!" Stepping close, Cymrica raised the edge of her cloak and drew Marian under it with her. "Let's go inside. We can sit by the fire and spin."

"I can't spin." She said it gloomily and stood firm when Cymrica tried to turn her back to the house.

"You mean you never learned? How strange. Wherever were you raised?"

"Somewhere they didn't teach spinning."

"All right, don't tell me. And you don't have to spin. Just come in to the fire. If you catch a chill, Godgifu will blame me for keeping you outside in the damp air. There's no warmth in the sun this morn." Cymrica glanced up at the cloudy sky before following Marian's gaze back out to the trees again. "You've small chance of seeing him now anyway, if that's your hope. Most say he only appears at night."

"What are you talking about?" The words came out in a rasp that had nothing to do with her sore throat.

"Aunt Isolde says coyness 'twixt ladies is most unbecoming and should be saved only for dealings with men."

The hell with Aunt Isolde. "I'm not being coy. Cymrica—"

"Shh!"

They both froze as a couple of spit-boys scurried by en route to the kitchens. Cymrica smiled graciously when they paused to bow. She waved them on their way, then lowered her voice to a whisper as she pulled Marian closer under the security

of her cloak. “You know what—or rather, *who*. The leader of the wood-devils, him they call *The Hooded Man*, or *Robin of the Woods*.”

“Or Robin Hood?” Marian almost choked on the name.

“That, too,” Cymrica said, the hint of a grin evident in her voice. She seemed to be enjoying some private joke.

Marian wished she’d share it with her. She could have used a good laugh just then. “What about him?” she asked weakly.

“Didst you know that some believe he’s one of the *old gods* of the forest, that he’s Robin Goodfellow, or mayhap Herne himself?” Cymrica countered, her whisper waxing mysterious.

A fresh chill shivered down Marian’s spine. Robin Goodfellow, the roguish Puck? The horned god Herne of Celtic mythology? As a matter of fact, she did know that theory. She’d even studied some of the evidence supporting it—the idea that the Robin Hood legend was rooted in ancient nature religions. It had been an interesting possibility to ponder when she’d researched the subject. But stuck as she was now, living the legend from the inside out, the idea seemed beyond bizarre.

“What do you believe?” was all she could respond.

“I’m not sure. Since we know now the other devils are men, I suppose ’tis likely he is as well—though ’tis said he shoots like a god, and the poor worship him as one for the aid he gives. ’Twould seem for every purse he empties, he fills two. But it matters not what I believe. I’m not the one who sang out ‘Robin, Robin’ like a drunken lark on the way home from Gisbourne’s t’other night.”

Oh, God, I didn’t. Marian felt her face flame and the chills down her spine turn hot. “Please tell me I didn’t.”

“All right, you did not.” Cymrica was happy to oblige. “Except, in truth, you did. But ’twas only Allan and Elaine and myself who heard you, and...um...” She hesitated.

Gulp. Marian could smell it coming. She finished the sentence herself to save Cymrica the trouble. No point in them both being mortified.

“And Roland,” she said with a groan.

Cymrica groaned, too, in sympathy, though in her case it sounded more like a chuckle. “Yes. We met him as we passed by...ah...”

“Tabitha’s cottage,” Marian finished for her again. This was going from bad to worse.

“Aye. He was just leaving it. I’m sorry.” The girl sounded genuinely contrite.

Nice of her, Marian thought, but unnecessary. It wasn’t her fault where her brother spent his nights, and they’d both known he was there, after all. “Timing is everything. Was he...um, surprised to see us?”

“Surprise is one word to describe it,” Cymrica said, and left it at that. “You’d been perfectly still up to then—so still I feared you might never awake. I had you propped before me on Aster, and Elaine was on Featherfoot, and Allan walked between us. Once we met Roland, he carried you on his horse.”

“Terrific.”

“I took old Featherfoot after that, so Allan and Elaine could ride Aster.”

“Poor you,” Marian said, still sore from the pony’s bounce.

“Poor Roland. You roused a bit in his arms, and cried out ‘Robin! Robin, I love you.’”

Wince. “I’m...sorry to hear that.”

“So was Roland, I’ll warrant. He said naught, but he did look rather...discomfited.”

"I can imagine." Marian didn't know what else to say. It seemed she'd already said too much. At the very least it must have been a blow to his ego to hear his wife declaring...um, affection for another man—especially in front of his fiancée and her husband. 'Twould have been embarrassing even if the declaration hadn't concerned a notorious outlaw.

Damn. Not that it didn't serve Roland right for forcing their wedding in the first place. What did he expect marrying a stranger? From his perspective she'd been an unknown quantity from the start. The big question was what he thought now. Probably that she was involved with the wood-devils.

God help her, she should be involved with them. Given half a chance, she *would* be. Why else was she here? Why was the hooded man she'd met here so like the hero of her dreams? Because they were the same? It made no sense, but none of this made any sense, so why not? If there was any rhyme or reason at all for the time-jump, why couldn't it have happened to bring her and Robin together?

Because you've never had that kind of luck, that's why.

Even if she had, she'd missed the boat now. Twice in as many nights Robin had rescued her—once from Sir Guy, once from the king—and both times she'd passed out on him. That was her kind of luck.

Well, technically maybe she'd saved herself from John, but in the process she'd saved herself from Robin as well. *Damned sleeping powder.* As near as she could figure, the only way he could have entered the house was by scaling the wall and climbing in through the bedchamber window. Exiting the same way with an unconscious Maid Marian in tow would have proved tricky even for a man of his talents. He had to leave her behind.

And now she'd have to stay behind for who knew how long. At least until the current hunt cooled, which could be what? Days? Weeks? Years?

She heaved a ragged sigh.

Cymrica sighed with her. "So where is Roland? Busy setting robin traps?"

Very funny.

"He rode over to the Gisbournes, to take custody of Mutch." Too bad he couldn't take custody of Gisbourne. There was the real criminal. But she couldn't prove that without endangering Allan and Elaine.

"Ah. He's too late. I have it on good authority that little bird flew free last night." The girl chuckled. "Sir Guy ne're should have hung Mutch's chains from the battlements. 'Twas too easy for a few crafty devils to pull him straight up one side of the wall and lower him to safety on the other side whilst his guard lay there snoring. I've just this morn listened to a new ballad composed in honor of his escape."

Marian heard her through a gray fog of depression, the news only half registering. "That's good. I'm glad he's safe."

"You do not sound glad. You sound troubled."

I am.

"Do you...want to talk about it?"

What was there to say? The legend was unfolding just as it should with the Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood on opposite sides of the fence. Everything was happening exactly right. Except it was all wrong. History in person wasn't nearly so black and white as it was on the page, was it? Fate had a wicked sense of humor to grant her dearest wish, then put her in a position where she couldn't touch it. The situation was dangerous enough as it was—for both sides. If she made any attempt to join Robin now, she'd bring the new sheriff swooping down on him that much harder. Bad news for everyone.

"No." Marian slipped her hand in Cymrica's. "Thank you, but I don't think talking about it will help." With a last mournful look at the forest, she stepped out from under the shared cloak and turned toward the manor house. "Let's go inside. You can teach me how to spin."

Since her head was already spinning, she might as well get her hands in on the action.

"As you wish." Sighing anew, Cymrica fell into step beside her. "And if you've naught to say, you can listen to me. I've worries, too, you know. There's more than one red-feathered bird in Sherwood."

Oh lord, she'd almost forgotten about him. Marian pulled up short and scanned the yard. "Where is Will? We'd better warn him what's happened. It's not safe for him here now. He'll have to take his songs elsewhere."

"He already has," Cymrica said glumly. "'Tis why I came looking for you. I wanted to tell you Will's gone to Nottingham Town. Like a fool I mentioned the year's harvest faire begins today, and off he went."

Poor Cymrica. The girl's latest infatuation was a lost cause whether Master Scarlet sang at the faire or not. Her family could never let her marry a common minstrel. But she looked so miserable, Marian didn't have the heart to remind her of that little detail.

She patted her on the arm. "Never mind. He'll be safer away from here. Besides, that *is* his job." And the man was darn good at it. "I bet people will be tossing coins at him right and left. His purse will be bursting at the seams before he's through."

"I daresay *something* will be bursting ere he's through. 'Tis not the coins that bother me but what else may be tossed at him. He'll have every bosom in town heaving is what he'll have."

Marian didn't doubt it. "That seems to be his job, too. Try not to think about it." Which was good advice for herself as well. Easier to say than follow though. She patted Cymrica again.

The girl sniffled and studied her own chest a moment. "I'd not mind so much if we could go also. My bosom can heave as good as the next, think you not?" She demonstrated by drawing a deep breath and letting it out with a dramatic whoosh.

"Very effective. But why can't we go?" A medieval faire sounded a lot more interesting than sitting cooped up inside spinning. Given Marian's present state of mind even mucking out the stables sounded more interesting. She glanced up at the manor house standing stark and forbidding under the gloomy gray sky, and it suddenly looked like a prison. It was a prison to her, but since she was willingly incarcerating herself, the least they could do was let her out occasionally for good behavior. "I think we should go. What's stopping us?"

"So do I. And Aunt Isolde. She says 'tis too dirty and crowded and unseemly for ladies. Roland agrees with her."

He would.

"The serving men and grooms have permission to attend tomorrow, along with the kitchen boys and the laundresses, but we shan't be allowed to go till the last day, and only then to watch the archery competition."

"Well, at least we get to watch the—" *Oh no.* Marian froze, a sudden dread closing her throat. "Archery contest?" she rasped out. How many versions of the Robin Hood legend included an archery contest? All of them. Often with Robin in disguise, and always winning the grand prize, usually something flashy like a gold arrow, meant to lure him. A bit of hubris was his one flaw. He couldn't resist

showing off his skill, even when he knew the contest was a trap.

She coughed and swallowed to clear her voice. “*Ahem...*who sponsors this contest?”

“Roland. As did our father and grandfather before him. The Earl of Hunterdon always sponsors it.” Cymrica stared at her curiously, as though she thought the question a silly one.

It was.

“Yes, of course.” Marian gave a dry laugh. “I knew that.” Or she should have. In the legends, the archery tournaments at Nottingham were always sponsored by the sheriff. And now, as luck would have it, the Earl of Hunterdon just happened to be the Sheriff of Nottingham as well. What a coincidence. Also rather odd now that she thought about it. An earl outranked a sheriff, didn’t he? She could understand a sheriff wanting to be an earl, but why would an earl want to be a sheriff? Where was the gain? He already had wealth and power. What else was there?

Love? Oh God, there was a horrible thought.

Marian squeezed her eyes shut to keep her brains from leaking out the corners. She really *was* going mad if she thought any of Roland’s actions were prompted by anything resembling love. For her. He hardly knew her, for heaven’s sake. His claims to the contrary had just been empty bedroom rhetoric and they both knew it.

No, there was something else behind this. Bruised ego? Regardless of how it happened or how they felt about it, she was his wife, which made her his property, more or less. Her calling for Robin must have yanked his medieval male chauvinist chain. That had to be all it was. She pressed her hands to her temples and opened her eyes to see Cymrica gazing at her with a mixture of suspicion and alarm.

“Um...I have a headache,” Marian said by way of explanation, but it also happened to be the truth. Or it soon would be, the way her mind was churning.

“You look it.” And the girl was obviously reserving judgment on the pro or con of that assessment. “Shall I have Godgiftu brew you some willow bark tea?” She punctuated the question with a gagging noise.

Having tried the stuff, Marian understood why. The tea worked, but the catch was you had to drink it first. “No thanks, I think I can manage without it.” A new horrible thought struck her. “Just tell me what the prize is.”

“Prize?” The guard popped up in Cymrica’s expression. She stepped back a pace, presumably to put some distance between them in case her sister-in-law’s erratic behavior suddenly turned violent. “What prize?”

“For the archery contest. What have we just been talking about?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Not sure what we’ve been talking about, or not sure of the prize?”

“Oh, I know the prize. Roland decided on it days ago. ’Tis different every year.”

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

Good grief, I’ve just invented Abbott and Costello.

“The prize! *What* is this year’s prize?”

“There is no need to shout.” Cymrica batted her eyes, looking hurt. “This year they shoot for a pair of oxen and a new plough. Are you happy now?”

Ecstatic. Marian blew out her breath. *No gold arrow.* Ox and plough were a worthy prize but utterly boring, not one you’d use for bait, unless you were trying to catch a farmer. She wasn’t sure which relieved her more, knowing the contest

wasn't a trap, or just the idea that Roland wasn't stooping to make it so. "Thank God."

Cymrica grinned. "That is what Aunt Isolde said. We gave goats last year and they ate her train. Hopefully, you'll have no such trouble with the oxen."

Marian hoped so, too. But not as much as she hoped she was wrong on what Cymrica was implying. "Um...you mean *I* have to award the prize?"

Please say no.

"Yes."

Damn.

"The earl's lady always does so. 'Tis Hunterdon tradition. When grandfather Cymric first began the contest, his wife awarded the prize. She was quite lovely. You've heard of her?"

Marian nodded. "Sigurd told me. He said you and Roland look like her."

"He tells me the same. Most loyal is Sigurd." Cymrica blushed and glanced down at the ground. "I wish I'd known her. They say 'twas part of the prize to receive it from the hands of the beautiful Black Rose. After her, my mother did the honors. She was lovely, too, I'm told. But I ne'er knew her either, or my father. They died whilst I was still in swaddling."

Ouch. Marian knew how that felt. "I'm sorry. Sigurd mentioned something about that, too, but he didn't say what happened. Was it illness?"

"No." The girl's eyes flashed up again, a sharp glint in them. "'Twas Gisbournes. A skirmish on the road. I know little the cause. Sir Sigurd was there, so was Roland. But neither of them will speak of it."

Marian's jaw dropped open. *Good God.* "Roland couldn't have been more than a boy then."

"He was twelve—close enough to manhood. Whether he was or not, he had to become so. With Father's death, Roland was named earl. He was seventeen when they married him to Eustacia, but she died the next year, so mostly 'tis been Aunt Isolde awarding the prize."

"The prize?" Marian stared blankly.

"Blessed Mother, now you're doing it. The prize for the archery contest. What else are we discussing?"

Too much.

"What I mean is, when Roland had no wife, Aunt Isolde gave the prize, but now that you are here, the honor belongs to you."

"Oh. Right."

Cymrica cocked her head, her eyes narrowed, studying. "You do not look pleased about it."

"I'm not."

"Would you like to tell me why?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Yes."

"But, Marian, mayhap I can help."

"No."

"It would not have anything to do with a certain hooded archer, would it?"

Yes. "No."

"Think you he'd risk entering the tournament? He'd be sure to win, too, wouldn't he? Perhaps he'd do so simply for the chance to get close to you. And Roland would be forced to—"

"Cymrica—"

"I know, I know, you do not want to talk about it." Her shoulders heaved with a small sigh. "Shall we go inside now?"

"Yes."

"Do you still wish me to teach you how to spin?"

"I think you just have."

Marian awoke the next day to grim thoughts and an empty bed. The latter should have been a relief. She wondered why it wasn't.

Roland hadn't come home till late the previous night. She'd heard him enter the bedchamber and buried her face in the pillow, feigning sleep. A long moment he'd stood staring, his eyes burning into the back of her head, then he'd turned and left. Off to a certain cottage in the woods, she supposed, and a warmer reception than any she dared offer him. It had taken her hours to find actual sleep after that, and when it came, it brought no comfort like it used to, no forest fantasy of heroics and love, just an aching black void.

Feeling anything but rested now, she climbed out from under the covers and into a deep blue robe Lady Isolde had given her. "It matches your eyes," the woman had said. This morning, the color also matched her mood. Terrific. At least she was nicely coordinated.

She lifted a lute, a second gift from Isolde, off a chair and sat by the window, holding the instrument on her lap and gazing across the front grounds to the trees of Sherwood, trees she'd once seen every night in her dreams. But no more it seemed. She doubted she'd ever have her Robin Hood dream again, not in sleep. The fantasy had crystallized into reality. There'd be no more dreaming it. She had to live it now. She ought to be leaping for joy. She felt like slitting her wrists.

Bending her head, she focused on tuning the lute instead.

A beating of wings drew her attention back to the window. She watched a bird alight on the sill and nearly burst into tears. The damn thing was a robin.

"Come to rescue me from the big bad sheriff? You're a little late, sweetie. But stick around, I was just about to play *our* song." With a humorless laugh, she returned to the tuning.

The robin cocked his head, staring intently at her. Marian talked to him while she fiddled with the strings.

"Tricky things, lutes. But not as tricky as spindles. Y'know, I think Isolde gave me this to stop me from learning how to spin. Well, actually to stop me from ruining any more wool. I discovered yesterday that spindles and I have a major personality conflict."

She'd had much better luck with the lute, having already mastered one of its descendants, the guitar, years ago in high school. Or should that be years ahead? Whatever.

"This sound okay to you?" She strummed a few chords.

The robin cocked his head in the other direction.

"That's about as close as I'm going to get it, I think. Listen carefully now, Sir Robin. This will be a big hit for the Righteous Brothers in about seven hundred and fifty years. I can't sing it as well as Bobby Hatfield, of course, but it doesn't sound half bad on a lute. Not now anyway. I sat here practicing last night after everyone else went to bed."

She demonstrated by playing an eight bar intro. "Feel free to join in. If you don't know the words, just hum."

With that, she sang a lonely lover's prayer, "Unchained Melody," sang the heart out of the song, drained its last drop, her voice soft but full of the lyrics' longing. A hunger hanging on through time. Wishing and waiting. Wondering. Hurting. The story of her life in a few simple verses. A husky baritone sang the final lines with her.

Marian's hands froze on the strings. Wide-eyed, she stared at the robin, a vise suddenly squeezing her chest. "I...um, didn't really expect you to know the words."

For answer, the bird raised his wings and sailed off the sill.

Deserter.

"I heard you singing it last night." Closing the door behind him with an ominous click, Roland moved into the room. His footsteps quiet as a cat's and sounding just as predatory, he crossed the floor to join her at the window, gazed out and down. "I stood there below, listening before coming in. A long time...a lonely time."

His gaze shifted to meet Marian's; something in his eyes sent a hot shiver down her spine.

A warning?

He looked...not happy. He wasn't the only one.

Hurriedly, she vacated the chair, putting it between them, clutching the lute in front of her by its neck. "I doubt you were very lonely last night."

A muscle twitched in his jaw. "And I doubt you know what I think or feel."

"I can guess." Hell, he looked a mess, his clothes dusty and wrinkled, a day's growth of beard darkening his face. "You're tired, aggravated. Right?" *So am I.*

"Um..."

"Had a rough day on the new job, did you? Or was it a rough night with the old mistress? Tabitha giving you a hard time? What's the matter, doesn't she like the idea of sharing you? Our wedding must have been a bit of a shock to her. It was to me."

"Marian—"

"What do you expect me to do about it?" Frustration poured out with the words. "None of this was my idea. I never asked you to marry me. If you don't like how things are going, that's your problem." She heard her voice rising, realized she was saying too much but couldn't stop. "And if you knew I was awake last night, why didn't you stay?"

Oh, crap, now she'd done it. Stupid, stupid question.

Roland's lips curled suspiciously at one corner. A wicked gleam lit his eyes.

Marian strangled the lute till her hands hurt. So help her God, if he laughed now, she'd club him senseless.

"If you knew I was here, lady, why did you not ask me to stay? Perhaps I was waiting for an invitation."

He smiled, and she felt the blood rush to her face.

"I...I didn't think you needed one. It's your house, your room, your bed—"

"My wife." His smile narrowed to a wolfish grin.

Me and my big mouth. She stepped back, but not far enough. With one sweep of a black booted foot, the chair between them went skidding to the side. The lute was yanked from her grip and tossed to the center of the mattress. Marian had the horrible feeling she was about to join it. She ducked under his arm and darted to the open window, facing out and latching onto the sill with a death-grip. If he tried anything now, he'd have to do it in full view of the estate. The autocratic Earl of

Hunterdon had too much propriety for that. She hoped.

Below her the manor had awakened to life, buzzing like a hive of bees. It was faire day for the lower members of the household. Laughing and jostling each other, men and boys loaded into two large wagons and several small carts. Marian hung out the window and waved to draw attention to herself. A young laundress looked up with a big cheery grin and waved back.

Oh, grief. Gasping, the lady of the manor nearly tumbled out headfirst. She gasped again as hands grabbed her from behind, jerking her off the sill and backward against a very solid, very male torso. Very distracting.

“What are you trying to do, break your neck?” Roland sounded none too pleased as he turned her around to face him.

Heart racing, Marian glanced up. He didn’t look pleased either. He’d be even less pleased if he saw what she had. Quickly she lowered her gaze and fumbled to push free.

His hold tightened, pulling her closer, like he was afraid she might leap for the window again. Silly man. She wanted to get him *away* from the window. Fast.

“I...I just lost my balance. I got dizzy.” With the feel of his body pressing against her, she was, too. Dizzy. Hot. Weak in the knees. “I need to sit down. I—”

Ouch.

She sat.

Suddenly.

On the floor when Roland released her to grip the window frame instead.

“I meant in a chair,” Marian muttered. *Damn. Too late.*

“Bloody hell,” Roland cursed.

Ditto. She winced as he bellowed.

“Cymrica! You have till the count of three to get out of that cart and back in the house. One!”

From her position directly below the window, Marian scrambled up and slipped between Roland’s arms to stare down. She saw Cymrica in her laundress’s smock and kerchief climbing hastily from the back of a cart to the front, beside the man driving. An agitated conversation ensued with many nervous glances up at the window and much angry gesturing of hands—the first from the driver, the second from Cymrica.

“Two!” Roland shouted.

Oof. Marian got trapped tight between him and the sill as he leaned out for a better view. Cymrica and the driver were now having a tug-of-war over the reins. With a grand shove that sent the man flying backward into the bed of the cart, Cymrica won. Laughing, the girl looked over her shoulder. She blew a kiss to her brother, then snapped the reins over the carthorse’s head and quick-trotted it out of the yard in a flurry of dust and squeaking wheels.

“Three,” Roland said. Still hanging out the window, he heaved a deep sigh. “God’s ribs.”

“No, mine. I-I can’t breathe,” Marian choked out, his weight squashing her.

“Whoops, sorry.” He pushed away from the sill, drawing her with him. His hands rubbed her waist and lower ribs through the folds of her robe. “Anything cracked?”

Just my mind. A wave of heat washed over her as he pulled her back against himself.

Almost absently, as though it were the most natural thing in the world, he locked his arms around her middle and rested his chin on top of her head. “Is that better?”

“Not much.” Breathing was more difficult than ever, in fact. Roland seemed not to notice. She sensed him staring out the window over her head, thinking. Outside, the last couple of carts were just leaving the yard. The happy voices of the faire-goers drifted upward on the breeze along with the scent of sunshine and fresh-cut hay.

“Impossible wench,” he muttered.

“Who, me?” She made an awkward attempt to wriggle loose.

His arms tensed, holding her firm. “No, Cymrica. You’re difficult, but not impossible.”

Ha-ha.

“I could send riders after her,” Roland said thoughtfully. “But God pity the poor man who caught her.” He thought a moment more and then decided. “I may as well just let her go.”

“Great. Now how about me?” Marian strained against his hold. He tightened it another notch.

“What? You’d like to go to Nottingham, too, would you?”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Mmm, ’tis an idea though. What think you?” He bent his head to whisper in her ear, a sudden devilment tingeing his tone. “Shall we play peasant for a day and join Cymrica at the faire?”

Huh? She craned her head around to stare at him. An almost boyish rebelliousness lit his eyes. Who was this man? Not the stuffy Lord Roland. “You can’t be serious.”

The gleam in his gaze said he was. “Why not?”

Good question.

“Because...um...” Because she wasn’t sure she wanted to spend the day alone with him, that was why. Not that they’d be very alone in Nottingham; there was bound to be a crowd. That was part of the problem. Who else might be there? It could be dangerous. But what was the alternative? Spending the day with him here? With most of the household gone, they’d be even more alone.

Marian’s gaze slanted to the bed.

So did Roland’s. Then his eyes met hers and he grinned.

“Let’s go to the faire,” she said quickly.

His grin broadened. “I knew I could convince you.”

He released her to lean out the window again, peering off to the ribbon of road in the distance. “Ah, the very thing.”

What was he looking at? She peeked around him, trying to see. The man must have eyes like a hawk to make out any details from here.

With a satisfied chuckle, he pulled back in and strode for the door. “Find yourself something old to wear—something simple, not too grand—then leave by the back of the house and meet me at the road. I’ve a business transaction to manage.” He paused in the doorway. “Take care not to tarry too long. If you’re not out shortly, I’ll come back for you.”

Was that a threat? Marian stood glaring as the door closed behind him. Disguises, huh? Sneaking out like naughty children? Whatever he was up to, he seemed to have it all figured out. Except for one small thing. He’d neglected to mention *where* she could find this old, simple, not-too-grand ensemble he wanted her to wear. Fortunately, she had her own ideas on where to look. A flash of pure inspiration actually.

Her mouth quirked up at the corners when a swift search of the outer chamber uncovered what she needed.

By the time she left the house—through the front door, straight past Sigurd, who sternly told her to mind her manners at the faire, then tossed her a pair of silver pennies to spend—she was almost looking forward to the day. Well, she was looking forward to Roland's expression when he saw her, at any rate.

Chapter 12

'Twould have been a long walk to Nottingham Town, rough on their shoes and the feet in them. Marian supposed she should be grateful for the butcher's cart that brought them instead of their own legs. She would have been grateful if the butcher himself had driven it. The happy butcher, however, had taken off in the opposite direction the moment the bargain was struck, obviously afraid that the eccentric earl who'd just offered him a rich suit of clothes in exchange for his own, plus twice what his rig was worth, might change his mind. A savvy businessman, Roland was not. He was now re-selling his newly acquired goods for a fraction of their market value—three pennies worth of meat for a penny. Mr. Mueller with his "buy low, sell high" rule would be appalled.

On the other hand, the faire-goers crowding their booth were delighted. Too delighted. Marian's blood pressure rose as a buxom blond hussy in a half-laced smock leaned forward to give the generous butcher a kiss by way of a tip. In the time they'd been there he'd received several such tips, all part of the festive spirit of the day, one could assume, but Roland was doing nothing to discourage it. In fact, he'd returned a few under the guise of "your change." She suspected he was doing it deliberately to annoy her, a little payback for her own disguise. Oddly enough, his ploy seemed to be working.

The blonde giggled. "My, such a frown on the lad. Cheer up, cherry lips. Here's a buss for you, too."

Before "cherry lips" could escape, the woman planted a big wet smacker square on "his" mouth. *Ew, yuck.* Marian scrubbed her face on her sleeve while a crowd of onlookers howled with laughter.

"La, look at the lad blush!"

"He's almost too pretty to be a boy, ain't he?"

"Ne'er you mind, little cherry lips." The blonde reached out and chucked Marian on the chin. "Give it a year or two and you'll enjoy a bit of kissing, I'll warrant. You come see me then." She winked at Roland. "And *you* can come see me anytime. I live yonder, by Loxley Town. Just ask for Pansy. Everyone there 'bouts knows me."

"I'll just bet they do," Marian gritted out through clenched teeth as Pansy turned and sashayed away.

Roland leaned over to whisper in her ear. "That's what you get for stealing Hodge's old clothes...cherry lips."

"Ha. Ha." Real comedian, wasn't he? She crossed her arms over her chest. "I didn't steal them. I *borrowed* them. It's not like you gave me much time to find anything else."

"I should have thought your green wool would have sufficed. 'Tis a simple enough gown."

Maybe, but it was also way too Maid Marianish, if a certain outlaw happened to be haunting the faire today. She refused to risk what might occur if he spotted her.

"You told me to wear something old. You wanted us to look like peasants, right?"

"That was the idea, yes. But I still expected us to look like a man and woman."

And act like a man and woman, too? No thanks. She refused to risk that either. All in all, this suit felt far safer. She straightened the tunic, hiked up the hose,

which were bagging at the knees, and settled the cap more securely over her tucked up curls. "What's the matter? You have something against boys?"

"Not at all. I was a boy once myself." His mouth twisted into a grin, a little wry. "However, I—"

A sudden commotion cut him off.

"Ye little rascal! Varlet! Stop him! Stop the thief!"

Uh-oh. Speaking of boys... Marian turned toward the shouting to see one she knew, dark eyes flashing with mischief, dark curls peeking out from under his hood, and a freshly baked meat pastie hot in his hands.

Orlando. Her breath caught as he dodged a grab from the irate pastie-vendor and disappeared into the crowd. She glued her feet to the ground to keep from running after him. *Damn, so close.* But trying to catch him under these circumstances could not only blow her cover, but draw extra attention to the boy—something else she didn't dare risk. Not until she could guarantee his safety. *If* she could guarantee his safety. That depended on—

Roland laid his hand on her shoulder. "Wait here. I'll be but a moment."

Now what was he up to? Through suspicious eyes she watched him weave his way past shoppers, jonglers, and gleemen to the pastie-wagon several booths down. A big beefy faire-ward—slow moving and slower thinking by the look of him—had already joined the red-faced vendor who stood by his wares waving fat arms in the air and bitterly bemoaning his loss. Sheesh, such a fuss. After a quick word with the pie-man, Roland drew aside the faire-ward for some private consultation. Oh no, he wasn't doing his sheriff thing, was he? Today? Incognito? Over one lousy pastie? Unless...

A warning chill prickled over her. How could she know what all Orlando had been doing the past few days, who he was involved with? It would be so like him to have even joined the wood-devils after meeting them in the forest. Good lord, why hadn't she considered that before? Roland could already be hunting him as one of the band. Fear coiled in her like a spring ready to pop.

I have to find him first.

Battling back panic, Marian scanned the crowd. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the beefy faire-ward leave Roland and lumber off in the direction Orlando had taken.

Good luck, chum. Orlando was used to ducking Philly cops. That poor clod didn't stand a chance of catching him.

But what if the man gained reinforcements somewhere along the chase?

Anxiously, she fingered the purse at her belt, her mind scrambling for a solution. The jingle of Sigurd's silver pennies and the appearance of a younger, swifter, sharper looking faire-ward brought her one.

On impulse she reached out and snagged him by his sleeve as he strolled past the booth. "Um, excuse me, but do you see that fellow there?" She pointed. "The big one?"

The young warder squinted off to where she indicated. "Ye mean Diccon?"

"I mean the one who looks like a stunned ox."

He chuckled. "Aye, that be Diccon. What about him, lad?" He gazed down at her, suddenly squinting anew. "Or should that be lass?" His lips curved into a knowing grin.

Marian blushed. She'd been right; this was a very smart man to catch what so many others had missed. Hopefully he'd be smart enough to catch Orlando, as well. Without wasting any more time or words, she laid out her request, giving him the incentive of Sigurd's pennies with the promise of more on the boy's delivery.

"Please don't hurt him," she finished. "Just keep him safe and bring him to Hunterdon Manor this evening. Tell him Marian wants to see him."

"Marian, is it?" The man's brows rose. "Wouldst that be the same Lady Marian I hear our Lord Roland has lately wed?"

Word traveled fast, didn't it? Her blush deepened. "Um, yes, that's the one. But don't say 'Lady Marian.' He might not know who you mean. Just say his friend Marian is waiting for him. If you tell him that, I don't think he'll give you any trouble."

He'd better not. The trouble would be all hers once Orlando was back with her. First, she'd have to convince him to stay. Then she'd have to convince Roland to let him. A difficult game. If she won it, she'd lose.

Her heart sank even as the warder promised her success.

"Ne're ye fear, m'lady...er, I mean, friend." He winked. "I believe I know the one ye seek. I'll fetch the little thief to ye." His eyes twinkling, he slipped off into the crowd.

Watching, Marian saw her last hope for happiness disappear with him. A lump filled her throat. She swallowed it down, blinked back the sudden sting of tears.

Get a grip on it. You're doing the right thing, the only thing. As long as Roland was the sheriff, she couldn't be with Robin Hood anyway, so her happiness had already been a debatable issue, a future hope at best. Orlando's safety was more important.

If the warder found him for her, she'd have to do whatever it took to keep him safe. If the boy was already a known thief—*gad*—he'd need a pardon, wouldn't he? Roland might have the power to grant one, or he could buy one. It depended on what exactly Orlando had done. Under medieval law, crimes could sometimes be taken care of by paying a fine. Clearing the kid's slate could be arranged one way or another. The bigger problem was what to do with him afterward. He'd need a home, and the only one she had to offer him was Hunterdon Manor. If he stayed there, she'd have no choice but to stay, too.

She couldn't pull the kid off the streets—or out of the forest, as it were—if she harbored the slightest hope of running off with an outlaw herself. A hell of an example that would set. Besides, the only thing she had to bargain for Orlando's safety was her own... Loyalty? Was that the word? She couldn't offer love, couldn't promise miracles, but she doubted Roland expected her to. He'd never said he wanted her love, hadn't offered her his. All he wanted was acquiescence.

Could she promise that? She'd have to. For Orlando's sake. If Roland would agree to protect the boy, provide for him, she'd agree to her...wifely duty.

Her knees suddenly weak, she sank down to sit cross-legged behind the waist-high plank that served as the booth's counter. Gazing out under it she saw the bottom half of the faire, a forest of legs kicking up dust as they moved past, some outlined beneath robes and skirts, some in bright colored hose. A green pair, long and thick as tree trunks, caught her eye.

"Jonathon—Jon Little!" someone called, and the green legs stopped.

So did Marian's breath.

"Wilst ye be trying yer luck at the archery tomorry, Jon?"

"Fer such a prize? Would that I could, but I've other work for the morrow."

"Work? Ye? Hah! Now, *that* I'd like to see."

Laughter followed and the sound of backs being slapped.

Little Jon? Marian scrambled onto all fours and crawled under the plank for a better view. *Umph.* Her face collided with the lower portion of a male torso

wrapped in a butcher's apron. She hugged the torso to keep from toppling. Something behind the apron twitched.

Gulp.

Hands gripped her shoulders to steady her as she swayed.

"Looking for someone?" Roland's voice sounded oddly strained.

All things considered, she wasn't surprised. Heart racing, she glanced up to see him grin, a wolfish slash of white framed by the dark shadow of his day's growth of beard. His grip tightened and he hoisted her to her feet. "Remember that pose. It might prove interesting to repeat it under less crowded circumstances."

"That's not funny." Glaring, she pulled free and stumbled back a pace, hid the trembling she felt by bending over to brush the dust off her clothes.

"I'm sorry. 'Twas a crude jest." His tone softened. "You've every right to be offended. I ask for your trust, then behave like a common swine. 'Tis no wonder you continue to balk at me."

With a sigh he dropped to one knee and finished the job of brushing her off. Warm shivers swept through her from head to toe. Her legs nearly crumpled out from under her at his touch.

He caught her hands, holding her before him when she tried to step away. "Would it help if I promised to better heed my manners from hence forth?"

It would help if he'd let go and stop trying to be so damned gallant. God, how she hated the way he made it impossible to...to hate him. She stared down at his face. *Too handsome*. Her heart hitched at the pleading in his gaze. Muffled laughter sounded nearby and she looked up to see passers-by blinking at them in amazement. Several snickered behind their hands; a few stopped and gawked openly.

Crap. It would also help if he'd stop making a scene.

"Get up." She struggled to jerk loose and knew she was turning beet-red under her boy's cap. "People are going to think—"

"Let them." His hands held her firm. "The only opinion I care for is yours. Tell me what I can do to gain a good one."

Good friggin' grief, the man was nuts. His wanting to play butcher at the faire had been wacky enough. To care what she thought? Pure insanity. Half-panicked, she searched his eyes, and was surprised to see nothing but sincerity. Sincerity and tenderness and...

Her throat went dry. *Love?* The panic increased. Oh no, that had to be a mistake. *You're the one who's nuts, Marian—completely.*

Hell, how would she recognize love even if she did see it? She'd only known love from one source—a blind one—she'd never seen Robin's face. Never would the way things were going. She pushed back the pain that rose with that thought. Then felt a new pain—sudden and sharp, shocking—that the first pain had been so slight, that she'd pushed it back so easily. Had she already said good-bye to Robin, in her heart and in her head? So quickly? Said good-bye *now*, when she'd finally found him, when she'd barely had the chance to say hello?

You did it for Orlando, because he'll need the protection Roland's position and wealth can give him. She'd done it for Robin Hood, too, to keep him safe, or at least safer, from the Sheriff of Nottingham. Right?

Wrong. As she felt herself sinking fast in the dark depths of Roland's eyes, felt the heat of his hands traveling up her arms to clutch at her heart, the truth pierced her like an arrow strike. *You're doing it for yourself most of all, you stupid fickle bitch.*

She moaned aloud at the revelation. "What the hell's the matter with me?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Rising to his feet Roland let go of her hands to pull her into an embrace, his arms trapping her against him.

Except, strangely, she didn't feel trapped. She felt...protected...cared for... Confused! Head reeling, she found herself helpless to do anything but cling to him for support.

"What can I do to put you at ease, to make you trust me? Besides an annulment," he was quick to add.

Marian stifled a cry against his chest—half sob, half laugh. "It's not you I don't trust. It's all men."

"All?"

She felt his muscles contract with the question, knew he was wondering about one man in particular, and not himself. She couldn't blame him. She was wondering about that man, too.

"Most men," she amended. "There's a reason for that, but you don't want to hear it. It's...not a very nice story."

"Tell me anyway. I'll wager I've heard worse."

Maybe. But she'd wager no man wanted to hear his wife had once been a whore. She swallowed down a sudden flutter of fear. "It might make you change your mind about that annulment."

His arms tightened around her. "If the story is yours, I want to hear it. I want to know everything about you. Believe me, there's nothing you can say that will change how I feel."

Everything? *I'm from the twenty-first century. How's that for openers?* She bit her tongue to keep from laughing hysterically. He had no idea what he asked. And she had no idea what he really felt. Even the little she *could* tell him was big enough. Did she dare? Drawing back, she searched his face for an answer—and nearly choked to see other faces peering over his shoulder, listening in rapt attention. The gawkers had closed in. Great. Where was a hole to crawl into when she needed one?

Cursing under his breath, Roland turned to confront the crowd. He shot a lethal grin at the man nearest. "Do you mind? This is a *private* conversation."

"Could have fooled me. Ye standeth here bold as day for all the saints to see," a female voice called, then giggled.

Pansy? Figured she'd be hanging by. The woman had a keen eye for beef—both in the booth and on the butcher. Marian winced. Pansy also had a cackle like a deranged hen. She thought this was funny, did she? *Bimbo*. The cackle turned to squawk when someone booted the blonde from behind. Ah, now *that* was funny.

"Saints, ay? That leaves *you* out, trollop," said whoever had done the booting. "Off, off—all of you! Find your entertainment elsewhere."

Amidst grumbles and chuckles the crowd scattered, leaving a young laundress scowling after them, her feet planted solidly on the trampled earth, her hands firm on her hips. Several steps away lounged a sleepy-eyed minstrel, red feather quivering in his cap as he lazily plucked his lute.

"Stupid, staring cows," Cymrica muttered. "One would think they'd ne're seen a butcher and his boy before." She flashed Roland a sly grin.

He beamed her back a broad smile and strode forward, arms outstretched in welcome. "Ah, Brunhilda, you saucy wench, we've been wondering if we'd ever see you today. 'Tis your turn to mind the booth."

"Brunhilda?" She glanced over her shoulder to make sure he meant her, wrinkled her nose when she realized he did. "What booth?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. She looked askance at the joints of raw meat laid out on the plank.

“Ew. *This* booth?”

Roland smiled brighter. “Aye. Clean up for me here, and I’ll excuse you from laundry duty at home. Otherwise”—his smile hardened into a tight line—“you’ll find yourself scrubbing linens from now till Michaelmas.”

Cymrica glared. “You’d not dare.” With a haughty sniff, she turned to leave.

He grabbed her arm and reeled her back. “Try me. If you dress like a laundress, I’ll see you act like one, sweetums.”

Marian watched the two of them lock eyes for an angry moment, until Cymrica grimaced and gave in.

“Oh, all right. But if my choice is ’twixt ‘Brunhilda’ and ‘sweetums,’ I think I prefer Brunhilda.” Dragging her heels she moved to take up position behind the plank, brushing past a lute-strumming heart-breaker on the way.

Black eyes met hazel, the hazel eyes half-lidded in a smoldering bedroom stare. Cymrica visibly melted. Her chest rose and fell with a deep sigh. She had that bosom-heaving down pat—must have been practicing all day. Will Scarlet seemed suitably impressed. His lips parted; his fingers faltered on the strings.

Marian’s own chest hurt just seeing the look that passed between the two, knowing they were riding for a fall. She glanced at Roland. He’d seen the silent sexy interplay, too. Like a hawk, his gaze flicked from the minstrel to Cymrica and back again. His eye caught Will’s and leveled a look on him that could only be a warning. Ever the autocratic earl, guarding the Hunterdon honor, even from behind butcher’s apron and rough beard. He could play commoner himself, but he couldn’t chance his sister being involved with one. If he only knew how common his own wife was. What irony. Her heart sank. The real irony was that suddenly she *cared* what he thought.

She studied his expression, so deliberately calm and controlled, as he strolled over to Cymrica, who stuck out her tongue at him. He pasted a grin on his face, took off his apron, and held it out to her.

“By the way, *Brunhilda*, have I mentioned that I’ve recently had an offer for your hand? A good one. I’m seriously considering it.”

The girl’s eyes opened wide with horror. Marian’s gut twisted in sympathy. Will bent over his lute in a fit of coughing.

Roland glanced at him out the corner of his eye. “Must be the dust,” he commented mildly, still grinning.

Cymrica snatched the apron from his hands and smacked it down on the plank with a sharp snap. “No! I’ll not marry him!”

“No?” Brother blinked innocently as sister glared murder. “Don’t you even want to know who it is? Ow—” He leapt back as she grabbed up a mutton leg and lashed out with it.

“I don’t care who it is! I’ll not have him! You can’t make me. If you try to force me, I... I’ll—”

“God’s ribs, wench, I’ll not force you.” He rubbed his shoulder where she’d whacked him with the mutton. “I’ll not force any woman to marry against her will. I’ve...ah, learned my lesson on that.”

His eyes touched Marian’s for an instant, soft, warm.

Quickly, she shifted her gaze and saw Will still slouched in the same spot a short distance from the booth, tuning his lute. Or pretending to tune it. She knew enough about the instrument to realize he was just giving his hands something to do, tightening and loosening the same two strings over and over again. He looked as uncomfortable as she felt.

“We’ll discuss this later, at home,” Roland told his sister. “If you’ll not have the man, so be it. You can tell him so yourself. He’s expected at the house this eve, to press his suit in person. Perhaps you’ll change your mind when you see him.”

A sharp twang sounded as a lute string, over tightened, snapped.

“Mmm, clumsy,” Roland murmured, and turned briskly away.

While Cymrica stood sputtering, Marian found herself grabbed by the arm and quick-marched out of the range of flying meat.

Chapter 13

"You'll not mind?" Roland's brows rose with the question.

Marian shook her head. He didn't honestly think she'd complain about a walk home, did he? When the people he gave the butcher's cart to needed it so much more? Get real.

They'd met the family traveling in the opposite direction just inside the forest, a ragged old woman named Bess and her five orphaned grandchildren, the smallest girl on crutches. Things didn't get much more pathetic. The way their faces lit when Roland turned the cart around and told them to climb aboard brought a mist to Marian's eyes. She helped the youngsters into the back while he lifted Bess onto the driver's seat and placed the reins in her hands.

"Are you certain you can handle this nag, grandmother? Perhaps your boy should—"

She let out a surprisingly hearty laugh and clutched the reins with a sure grip. "Lord love ye, lad. If one old mare can nay handle another, who can, ay?"

"A good point." Roland laughed with her. "But I've a boon to ask of you now." As she stared in disbelief, he untied the pouch from his belt and laid it in her lap. "I'm a man who likes to travel light, and this weighs heavy on me today. 'Twould be a great service if you'd take it."

Her hands trembling, Bess dropped the reins to open the bag and empty its contents into the folds of her skirt. Five sets of eyes in the back of the cart grew wide as saucers when a jingle of silver spilled out. With a gasp, the old woman shoveled the coins back in and pulled the pouch strings tight.

"Nay, butcher." She thrust the money at him. "Ye'll be needing this yerself. There be a year's wages here if a penny."

Watching and listening from behind the cart, Marian felt her gaze misting again. Bess's "year's wages" were just pocket change to yon "butcher," but the offering was still a beautiful gesture on his part. She doubted many men of Roland's rank would have even noticed the family, let alone cared enough to help. Why didn't it surprise her to learn that he did?

Bess shook her head, her own eyes moist. "Bless ye, but ye've gifted us much already. I could ne're accept more."

"Of course you can—for the children's sake. And mine. I can't take back a gift once given. 'Twould be ill luck for sure." Smiling, Roland pressed the purse into her palm and closed her fingers around it. "'Tis yours. No worries now, grandmother, I'll not go hungry for the lack of it."

The littlest girl, the one with the crutches, sat up straight, peering at him in awe. "I know! Ye be Robin Hood!"

"Aye, that he must," her brother agreed.

Her three sisters all chimed in, giggling.

"Aye, 'tis only Robin—"

"—who helps folk like us."

"D'ye remember when Ned near lost his farm—"

"—an' Robin sent the rent fer him?"

"An' the time Peter wast taken fer poaching—"

"—the wood-devils freed him!"

"An' when Widow Sary lost her milk cow—"

"—Robin left her a new one..."

Their voices tumbled over each other like the excited peeling of bells. Marian's blood pounded in her ears along with the chatter. She gripped the edge of the cart till her fingers ached, fighting to keep her legs steady beneath her.

"Hush! What if the sheriff or his men were to hear ye talk so?" Bess glanced fretfully about, as though expecting armed forces to ride down on them at any moment.

Poor woman. She had nary a clue the sheriff had already heard. Feeling herself take on a greenish tinge, Marian looked over the children's heads at Roland, whose smile lay frozen on his face.

He leaned over the side of the cart to whisper, "Ah, you've discovered my secret, have you? I am that rogue Robin—though I left my hood behind today, I'm afraid. Can you guess who I've robbed to bring you this purse?" He paused while five little jaws dropped in breathless suspense. "Lord Roland, the awful Earl of Hunterdon himself!"

The children shrieked with laughter. Old Bess let out a loud cackle. Even the horse snorted. Marian clenched her teeth, blue eyes blazing.

Roland met her glare and clapped a hand over his heart like one wounded. "What? I should have thought my own boy at least would believe me."

Ha. Ha. Ha. Quite an actor, wasn't he? Too bad the Academy Awards hadn't been invented yet. 'Twould be so satisfying to leap the length of the cart and cram an Oscar down his throat. Sideways.

Bess wiped tears of merriment from her wrinkled cheeks, tried to sound stern. "There now, ye shouldst nay josh so. I daresay e'en Robin would ne're front an earl. And Lord Roland be not so bad as some." Her tone brightened with the offer of gossip. "Have ye heard he's been wed?"

"Heard, grandmother?" A chuckle rolled out, smoky and low. "I've seen the bride."

"Well, fancy that. Be she pretty as they sayeth?" The old woman was all ears.

And the butcher was all eyes, his gaze hot on his "boy."

"Far prettier. The lady's beauty puts sunshine to shame. She's an angel, with a spirit sweet as her face."

Oh God. Marian clutched the cart again to stay upright. Anger melted away in one long sizzling stare. An ache took its place, squeezing her heart like a fist.

Bess's eyes narrowed, intent on Roland. "That pretty, ay? By the look of ye, lad, ye've a wanting fer such a lass yerself."

"Grandmother..." His voice sounded suddenly hoarse. "You can't begin to imagine how much I want such a lass." His gaze bore into Marian's.

She felt the fist in her chest squeezing harder, closed her eyes against the longing in his, searched for a reason to not want him in return. Couldn't find one.

A raspy laugh cut through the tension. "Bless ye, I'm nay so old I can't feel the heat of a fire when sitting near it. 'Twasn't so long ago I could stoke a good blaze meself." Another laugh sounded, and the creaking of the cart seat as its occupant shifted position. "Here, ye'd best have this."

Marian pried open her eyes to see Bess pull a shiny disc out the front of her smock and over her head. It looked like a small brass mirror on a cord.

"'Tis a charm. Fer luck." With an aura of solemn ceremony, the old woman leaned close and hung it around Roland's neck.

Speechless—an odd state for him—he looked down at it, hesitating, while Marian stood mesmerized by the play of light glinting off the charm as it rose and fell against his chest with his breath. She felt his discomfort, and his wonder, could

almost hear his thoughts. The brassy bauble was probably the greatest treasure the old woman owned. How could he, with a house full of gold and jewels, take it from her?

Frowning, he raised the cord over his head. "No, I—"

Bess caught his hands in hers and stopped him. "Aye, ye must take it. 'Tis a small enough gift in exchange fer what ye've given me, but..." Her mouth abruptly went slack, her gaze cloudy, unfocused, staring off over his shoulder at...nothing it seemed.

A senior moment? Old Bess didn't suffer senile dementia, did she? Gooseflesh prickling her arms, Marian glanced at the children, none of whom looked the least concerned.

The boy yawned. "Gran's having one of 'er seeing fits."

"Aye," the girls chorused.

"She *sees* things—"

"—things nay one else can."

"Hears things, too."

"Aye, but she'll nay tell what she sees or hears."

"When she tells—"

"—she scares folk."

She's scaring me now without saying a word.

Marian breathed out in relief when the trance broke as suddenly as it began.

Echoing the sigh, Bess released Roland's hands and sat back, blinking and shaking her head. "Bless me, I'm getting too old fer this." She gave a small grunt, reached out and patted the charm on his chest. "Keep it. Ask me not why, but I've a...feeling ye'll be needing it." Her eyes twinkled into his. "Wear it close to yer heart. Who knows, if it nay brings ye luck, mayhap 'twill bring ye love."

"I could use a bit of both." With a dry laugh, he straightened the cord round his neck and dropped the brass piece down the front of his tunic. "My thanks to you, grandmother. I shall treasure it."

"I'm sure ye shall. But the thanks be all mine, Robin-*without-the-hood*." She flashed him a grin. "And if ye happen to see Lord Roland, ye might give him my thanks as well."

Chuckling, she picked up the reins and drove off, her grandchildren all waving from the back of the cart.

Roland and Marian stood silently on the empty road, watching until the family was out of sight. As the squeaking of wooden wheels receded into the distance, he glanced sideways at her, a slight twitching at the corners of his lips. "So...do you think they suspected who we are?"

"I can't imagine why. It's not like you were being *obvious* about it or anything." Her pulse quickened when he turned his gaze full on her. Hot, dark... obvious. Her mouth went dry. "Um, that was supposed to be a joke."

"I know. I'll laugh in a moment. First, there's something else I'd like to do." His gaze tugged at her—searching, almost shy—sending her pulse into overdrive. "That is, if you'd like to do it as well? I did promise to mind my manners, if I recall."

Yes, he had. Darn it. He'd also promised she could tell him anything. More's the pity. Both promises sat like lead inside her. If she took advantage of the second, she might destroy any need for the first. She was beginning to wonder how much need there was for the first anyway.

How about if I just keep my story to myself and you do the same with your manners?

She swallowed and forced a smile onto her face. "That depends on what you mean by 'it.' I'm open to quite a bit at the moment."

The words came out breathy. Seductive? *Amazing*. She was changing, wasn't she? Something deep within her was waking, thawing, reaching out. Had Roland done this to her?

Suddenly she wanted him to do a lot more.

His breath caught at her response. Marian wasn't surprised. She could only imagine what he was seeing in her expression. Hope gleamed in his eyes. Hope and disbelief. Perhaps a touch of wariness, too? Smart man. With a loon like her for a wife, he probably should be wary. Especially now, when she was finally feeling so *unwary* herself.

"*Ahem*." He cleared his throat. "I was thinking of a kiss." His voice lowered, grew huskier as the gleam in his eyes heated. "I've been thinking of it all day."

"I noticed." Her smile turned a tad sour. "Between the tipping and the change-giving you've already kissed almost every girl at the faire."

"You call that kissing? Those were mere pecks."

"I doubt Pansy would agree."

"Pansy be damned." His arms slipped around her, pulling her against his chest. "*This* is a kiss."

No, it wasn't. It was giddiness spinning her head, sparks tingling her skin, a red hot hunger building in her belly and spreading out like wildfire through her veins, weakening her limbs. She clutched his arms, let her hands sweep up over his shoulders and around his neck, tangled her fingers in his hair...opened her mouth to his.

It was brain-bending, soul shattering bliss. Hard muscles and soft lips. The warm woodsy scent of the forest surrounding her with his embrace, stirring something...a not-quite-memory, a shadowy sense of déjà vu...

Her heart slammed against her ribs.

It was *Robin*?

Eyes wild, she shoved away and stumbled back over the ruts in the road, stood there gasping, staring, shaking like the leaves in the trees.

No. It couldn't be. She imagined it. Just a brief mad fancy, a momentary illusion triggered by the sound and smell of Sherwood, by his joking with old Bess. By her own desire. She just *wanted* him to be Robin, that was all. Wishful thinking. Things would be so easy for her if he were. There'd be no need to choose between the two of them.

A dull ache settled into the pit of her stomach. She would have to choose, wouldn't she? Really choose. Not just with her head, but with her heart. Even if she stayed with Roland regardless, she'd have to decide once and for all and for good *why* she was staying. If it was for Orlando's sake, for Robin Hood's safety? Or simply because she couldn't bear to leave this confusing man who'd somehow become her husband.

She gazed across the road to see he'd pulled out Bess's charm and stood studying it by the afternoon sunlight, his black brows knitted together in a frown.

"Hmph." With a snort, he tucked it back inside his tunic. "For a moment there I thought the damn thing was actually working."

His eyes met hers and his frown lifted into a small grin, a little wry, a little sad. All red-blooded sexy. "I, ah, seem to have overstepped my boundaries again. I'm sorry. I thought you wanted that kiss."

Unfair. He shouldn't say words like *kiss* in that voice, with those lips. She clasped her hands together to stop their trembling, tried to beat back the blush she

felt flaming her face.

"I did want it." God help her, if he kept looking at her like that, she'd be wanting another. "It's just that I...I..."

Oh hell, she'd have to tell him. There was no other way to explain why she constantly acted like such an idiot. Probably it would solve the choice dilemma, too. Once he knew her background, he'd realize what lousy material she was for an earl's lady. He'd have no choice himself but to dump her. And she'd have her chance with Robin, after all. Why did she find so little comfort in that?

Her hands dropped to her sides. Helplessly, she stared at him staring at her, his eyes sharp with concern, piercing, probing... And too close. Her hands flew up again as he stepped toward her, stopping him in mid-stride.

"Stay there. Please. And don't...don't look at me. I won't be able to talk if you look at me." She drew a deep breath to steady her voice as, reluctantly, he lowered his gaze.

"Is that better?" he asked.

"Not much, but it's a start." For good measure she shut her eyes so she wouldn't have to see him. Blindly she backed off the road till her spine hit one of the great oaks at the side. The impact helped rattle her thoughts into order. With a sigh she slid down the barked bole to sit on the forest floor. The rustling of the woods wrapped round her and she filled her lungs with the fragrant air—the rich earthy aroma that always spelled *sanctuary* in her mind.

God, how weird to be sitting here now, about to tell the tale that had turned her into "Maid Marian" in the first place. What bittersweet irony, a full circle journey almost. How often she'd retreated to this place in her dreams when reality grew too nightmarish to bear. Now the dream was the reality and the nightmare lived on only in her head. Maybe by spilling it out here, in the green arms of Sherwood, she could finally gain some release. Maybe more release than she wanted at this point, but he had a right to know.

If he decided now to end the marriage—tried for an annulment, packed her off to a convent as she'd once begged for—she wouldn't blame him. He'd only be doing his job, safeguarding his family's honor according to the beliefs of his day. The Hunterdon bloodline was at stake. Roland the man might think and feel one thing, but the Earl of Hunterdon could never let his heirs be mothered by a... By her.

Shutting her eyes tighter, she told him what she should have told him right up front and saved them both a lot of trouble—told him quickly, before she could change her mind.

"You've married a whore. A real one. Men have paid top price to hump me. And I gave them their money's worth."

Too harsh? Too bad. There was no nice way to say this. As awful as it sounded, it had felt far worse.

She paused, listening for an explosion. Cursing? A groan, a growl, a little grunt maybe?

Silence. That didn't bode well, but since the hard part was already out, she'd better explain the rest.

"It wasn't my idea. It was my uncle's. He needed the money." Needed it so much, he'd pimped his thirteen-year-old niece. No, that wasn't exactly right. He lost her in a poker game was what happened. He couldn't help it; he'd have bet anything. His drinking and drug use were just the tip of the iceberg. Gambling was his favorite addiction. Her chest constricted at the memory.

With her eyes closed she could almost hear the shuffling of the cards, the clink of the booze bottles...and Big Arnie's laughter drifting up from their living room into the attic crawlspace where she'd been trying to hide. She always hid when Uncle Ted had Arnie over. Big Arnie had been the real pimp. He'd had a whole stable of girls working for him. Arnie had liked them young. Arnie had liked her.

Shit. Just start at the beginning, Marian.

"My parents were killed when I was a baby." A car crash, but never mind that; he wouldn't know what a car was. "I didn't have any other family so my mother's sister and her husband got custody of me. If my aunt had lived, things might have been okay, but she died a year later, leaving it just me and my uncle. I don't even remember her."

She remembered Uncle Ted though, couldn't forget him no matter how hard she tried. Uncle Ted, who'd never wanted a child in the first place and didn't know what to do with the one he inherited, who'd blamed her for all his woes. Two days after he gave her to Arnie—the longest two days of her life—he died of a drug overdose, the only helpful thing he ever did for her.

Cripes, this was a stupid story. Why on earth had she even started it? Why didn't Roland say something? Hell, maybe he'd already walked off and left her sitting here alone. She was afraid to open her eyes and check.

I wouldn't blame him if he has.

Suddenly feeling flatter than yesterday's road-kill, she mumbled out the rest of the tale in a dull monotone, tweaking an item here and there to match it to medieval imagery. Mr. Mueller she described as a kindly cleric in charge of a library—close enough. Police became knights in armor, a phone call the blowing of a horn. The "after years" as she called them, the years she'd spent passed from one foster home to another, she skipped completely. They all blended together in a blur anyway. Big Arnie's establishment she left fairly intact. Prostitution was said to be the world's oldest profession, after all. Sadism had probably been around just as long. Nothing new there.

She told how her uncle had beat her and berated her and gambled her away, how she was dragged out of the house that night, how she spent hours the next day tied to Arnie's bed being used by him and his clients however they pleased—her "breaking-in period" he'd called it. She didn't mince words, but she didn't dally over the details either. She told it straight and fast, biting back emotion, just to get the bloody confession over and done with and out of her head.

The only place her voice faltered was when she admitted how she'd finally given in. If Roland was still listening, he'd really hate that part, wouldn't he? How she surrendered, promised to be a good little whore so they'd take off the ropes. She'd been ready to burst by that time—all over—body, brain, and spirit. She thought she'd die if they didn't untie her. The next day, she wished she had. That was the worst day, the day Arnie made her play whore in truth, made her act like she enjoyed it.

"Don't just take it, baby. You gotta give it and give it good," he told her. They'd just heard the news of her uncle's death. "You ain't got nobody but me now, nowhere to go but here. You gotta do what I say, 'cause no one else gives a shit what happens to you. Understand? You think the cops care, huh? You're just a statistic to them. They see kids like you all the time—a dime a dozen. I'm the only one who cares, sugar, and don't you forget it. You fight me, you get hurt. You do right by me, and I'll do right by you."

God help her, she'd been young enough and scared enough to believe him. She serviced six clients that night, and Arnie quizzed each one afterward to make sure she'd given a good show. She had. But that had marked the end of any acting ability she might have possessed. Two days at Big Arnie's knocked all the bluff out of her. A third day she might not have lasted, but the third day never fully materialized.

Considering her safe by then, Arnie took her out the third morning to help him select a wreath for Uncle Ted's funeral. "I know he was a shitty uncle to ya, kid, but he was one of my business associates, sorta. I gotta give him a good send-off, y'know?" Strange guy, Arnie, with a strange set of priorities.

The florist's happened to be on North Broad, right next to a used bookstore—Mr. Mueller's store—and Arnie was feeling magnanimous. He knew she liked books. He gave her a few bucks and told her to browse around Mueller's while he ordered the wreath. But she hadn't wanted to touch his filthy money. The second his back was turned, she shredded the bills and stomped the pieces into the gutter. Then she'd panicked because she realized Arnie would expect her to either have a book in hand or return the cash.

That was how she ended up stealing *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*.

And that was how Big Arnie ended up in a squad car a short time later. He'd been wrong. The cops did care.

So did Frank Mueller. He'd grabbed her arm when she tried to exit his store. She'd been terrified he'd seen her filch the book, but it turned out he was more interested in the rope-burns he'd seen on her wrists. Without a word, he locked the street door, then ushered her back to his office where he called the police.

End of story. Or the beginning. Marian was no longer sure.

"That...that's why I have this...um, little problem with men," she added as an epilogue. It was also how Robin Hood had metamorphosed from the storybook hero of her childhood to a full-blown fantasy, her warm comfort when the lights went out and she was left alone with cold horror in her head. The nightly dreams had started not long after her experience with Arnie. But Roland wouldn't want to hear that part—if he was still close enough to hear anything. That was the crazy part of her story, the part she never told anyone. Not even their star player knew about those dreams.

Then again, maybe Robin Hood did know. Maybe she'd haunted his nights the way he'd haunted hers. Maybe they'd been dreaming the same dream together. *Hah, talk about crazy*. But no crazier than the time-jump itself. Why else did he seem to know exactly who she was? Why did he say he loved her? Why did he appear when she needed rescue?

Her breath froze in her chest. *Oh no*. What if he'd just "rescued" her again? This was such a perfect set-up for it. Maid Marian and the sheriff. In Sherwood. Alone. What if the real reason for Roland's silence was that he lay dead in the bushes right now, an arrow through his heart, with the one who shot it crouched nearby, grinning into his hood, waiting for her to open her eyes and—

No! She bolted to her feet and flew forward—crashed smack into a brick wall. Roland's chest. No arrows sticking out of it. She dug her fingers into the rough wool of his tunic, faint with relief.

Get a grip on yourself. A panic-attack, that's all this was. She was a fool. A fool for overreacting, a bigger fool for telling him anything in the first place. God, he looked angry, his mouth grim, pure ice in his eyes. She'd expected a bad response, but she hadn't expected just how bad it would hurt.

Forcing open her fingers, she released him and staggered back, feeling like a rag doll coming apart at the seams, all the stuffing ripped out of her. "I'm sorry. I did warn you it wasn't a nice story." Brittle words, and hoarse.

"You're *sorry*?" He made a strangling noise in his throat. "God's blood, lady, in your place I'd be wanting to castrate every man and his brother." The ice in his eyes turned to black fire. "I'd like to perform the job myself on everyone who's ever hurt you."

He what? "I...I thought you'd be...upset?"

"I *am* upset!"

"I meant with *me*!" Ouch. She winced at the volume of her own voice. Why were they shouting? "I'm sorry." Her apology sounded small, the squeak of a mouse to Roland's answering roar.

"Will you *stop* saying that? You've *nothing* to be sorry about!"

"Okay! I'm sorry." *Oops*. She winced again when he rumbled out an exasperated growl, then felt her insides begin to crumble when his expression softened.

An agony of tenderness. She'd read the phrase, but never experienced it until this moment. Like liquid warmth his gaze melted into hers; like velvet his voice touched her ear, stealing her breath, stirring her straight down to her core.

"Marian, how could you possibly think I'm upset with *you*?"

Aside from the fact that he'd been yelling? A lot of reasons. Why couldn't she think of any? Because it was impossible to think, period, with him looking at her like that. She hugged herself, trying to stop a sudden trembling, to hold back her emotions before they flooded out in tears.

"May I do that? Please?" Roland opened his arms for her. "Come here, sweetheart, let me hold you."

No. He sounded too nice, too caring. He knew, and he still treated her like a lady. She wasn't sure she could stand it.

"I can't. If I move right now, I'll break up into bits." She hugged herself harder, then found herself inside Roland's arms. A hug within a hug. A warm port in a storm.

"I'll come to you then," he said.

With a moan, she let go of herself to hang onto him. How much she'd needed the embrace she hadn't even realized till she was snug against his chest. "You really don't care what happened?" *Unbelievable*.

"Of course I care—tremendously. I care because it hurt you so badly." His hold strengthened around her, as if he hoped that by sheer force he could squeeze out her pain. "But I'm not angry *at* you, love. I'm angry *for* you."

Love? He called her *love*?

She shoved back just enough to look up at him, struggled to pull enough air into her lungs to speak. "But it's made me sick inside. It means I'm weak... damaged." Didn't he understand? "I gave in. I *surrendered*."

"The hell you did. *Dying* is surrender. You *survived*. You fought back the best you could—the only way you could—by staying alive. That's not surrender. That's courage. To hang on to life through all you've suffered takes an iron grip. And you call yourself weak?"

"I am." She certainly was now. Her legs hung beneath her like limp rags. Without his arms, she'd be flat on the ground. She sank forward, pressing her face into the warm spot between his neck and shoulder, and splaying out her fingers on his chest, letting him hold her upright, afraid to let him do any more. He couldn't convince her she was wrong about herself. But—*oh lord*—it felt so good to hear

him try. *He* felt so good. What a damn shame she had to disillusion him.

“Roland, you don’t know the half of it. I have a lot of...problems.” The panic-attacks, the sleepwalking—

“You mean your, um...fondness for wine?”

Yeah, that, too. Especially that.

“I’ve noticed it.”

Big surprise. The amount of alcohol she could put away was pretty hard to miss.

He shifted his grip to wrap one arm around her waist. The other he raised to cradle the back of her head in his hand, pulling her more securely into himself.

“I’ve also noticed that you can control it when you wish.” His lips grazed her brow.

She quivered at the tiny kiss. Or was that more from the concept he’d just offered? *Could he possibly be right?* She’d been raised by an alcoholic, for heaven’s sake, she ought to know what it was like.

Thinking about it, she realized she did. Her uncle had been the one with no control. Ted had lived in a bottle—when he wasn’t blitzed on drugs. He’d tried to quit a few times. Always failed. She wasn’t like him, was she? She’d never been *that* bad. She’d managed to get through college, hold down a job. She used alcohol to deaden pain, but remembering Ted with his whiskey, she’d always stuck to wine. Too much wine maybe—but not *all* the time, not every day. She could say no to it when she wanted. It was just that usually she hadn’t wanted to. Until recently.

Man oh man, this time-jump had changed a lot more than her century, hadn’t it? It was changing the whole way she dealt with life, how she looked at herself.

No, it isn’t. Roland was doing that.

She slid her hands down his chest, wound her arms around his middle. An unconscious gesture. She hardly realized she’d done it till the hug was complete. It felt so natural.

“So what are you telling me? That I’m stronger than I think I am?” She tilted back her head to glance up at him, and froze, something in his eyes holding her tighter than his arms.

“Sweetheart, I’ve known some strong people, brave people—men bred for battle. But never have I met anyone stronger or braver than my own dear wife. I’m only sorry I’m not a king, for if any woman deserves to be a queen, ’tis you.”

Crack—

Marian heard it clearly, not with her ears but in her head. The sound of a heartstring snapping. *Twang—* There went another one. A heart was splitting open. Hers. She tried to speak, move, tried to breathe. Discovered she’d forgotten how to do all three. Paralyzed. There was nothing for it, no cure but to stand locked in the embrace, the warmth of his body melting into hers, the heat in his eyes slow roasting her soul.

Help...

She believed him—didn’t believe what he said, but believed that he believed it, that he meant it. Damn him. Did he realize what he was doing, that he was pushing her straight over the edge of choice onto the rocks of decision below? Did he know how much it hurt to say good-bye to a dream?

Sudden guilt shoved her out of his arms and across the road. Tears welled in her eyes and she let them fall, for once made no attempt to check the sobs. They racked through her in big choking gulps, shaking her shoulders, twisting her stomach into a hard knot. She didn’t care. She should be crying. Robin deserved better from her than this. For so long he’d been her hero. He’d saved her from Sir

Guy, and so many things in so many dreams before. From so many dangers he'd rescued her.

But it had taken Roland to rescue her from herself.

All those years she'd believed in Robin Hood, but Roland was the only one who'd ever believed in her.

She hadn't known what love was till Roland of Hunterdon filled her with his. The way she'd loved Robin had never felt like this. Hero worship, maybe that's what it had been.

Roland was no hero, just a kind, sweet, compassionate man who made her feel good about herself in ways she'd never thought possible. That was heroic enough. She wouldn't even count the fact that he was handsome enough to incite riots. Heck, at this point, she'd love him if he were short, fat, pockmarked and bald. Of course...it was nice he wasn't. Tabitha had better start looking for another bed-warmer, because the new lady of the manor suddenly felt very disinclined to share. Still sobbing, Marian made a mental note to send the woman some extra blankets; she was going to need them.

And I have to find some way to send a message to Robin. For his own safety as much as anything. She owed him that much at least. If he honestly did love her, this would hurt him, but she couldn't help it. She could only give him her apologies and beg him to stay away.

Maybe she owed history an apology, too. *I'm sorry, but Maid Marian doesn't end up with Robin Hood. It seems she's fallen madly in love with the Sheriff of Nottingham.*

Groaning, she buried her face in her hands. How could part of her feel so lousy while the rest felt so...so wonderful, darn it. She couldn't help that either. Loving Roland did feel good. Deep inside, it felt right. So why did she also feel so wrong? If this was true love, it wasn't at all what she'd expected. It was too complicated!

Was it possible to love two people at once? With an effort she dropped her hands from her face and gazed across the road at Roland. For a moment she could hardly see him for the tears, but even blurry he looked beautiful. Her heart skipped a beat at the simple sight of him. Her question was answered—no. Maybe some women could love two men, but not Marian, neither the maid nor the lady. Not even “just plain Marian.” For all three, Lord Roland of Hunterdon was the only one.

Silently he stared back at her, his eyes hooded, his handsome face stripped of all expression save a slight cynical curl at one corner of his mouth. His too cool, too calm, autocratic earl look, the look that used to set her teeth on edge. But finally she recognized it for what it was. A defense mechanism, a mask. He slapped it on when he needed time to think how to react to a situation. Amazing how well she knew him now. Underneath that cool mask, his emotions were steaming.

So were hers.

She choked back the last of the sobs and mopped away her tears with her sleeve, then stood still, hugging herself, waiting for him to speak. She didn't trust her own voice, wasn't sure what to say anyway. She'd never before told anyone she loved them. No one but Robin, in her dreams.

Ouch. She sniffled furiously to hold back a new burst of tears.

Letting out his breath in a curse, Roland pulled a square of cloth from his belt and closed the distance between them in three long strides. “Here, 'tis all I have at the moment.”

Gingerly, she took the offered rag from his fingers. Ew, it was the one he'd used to wipe blood and grease off his hands at the butcher's booth, but better than

nothing. Locating a clean corner, she blew her nose, then wadded up the cloth and clutched it in her fist. He, um, probably wouldn't want it back at this point.

Her "thank you" came out in a muffled croak, the best she could manage.

"You're welcome." His voice sounded husky and hoarse. "I'm sorry to have upset you. Again." The mask began to crack at the edges. A wry smile touched his lips. "I'm sorry you find my feelings for you so painful. I'll try to keep my... emotional declarations to a minimum in future."

Marian's jaw dropped. He'd misunderstood completely. She wasn't crying over him. *His* feelings weren't the problem. *Hers* were.

Tell him, you idiot.

"I...I..." *I can't say it.* Not here, not in Sherwood.

Later. She'd tell Roland tonight, at the house, on his own turf. Then she'd put Robin Hood and her forest dream behind her for good.

Chapter 14

“Do yer boy not talk, butcher?”

Ho ho ho. Nope, not much. Bouncing on a bare board wagon seat between the wry-witted butcher and the jolly green giant who was driving, the “boy” was having the most wretched ride of her life. Pure hell. Marian clenched her jaw to keep from screaming.

“He’s a bit shy is all.” Chuckling, Roland slung his arm about her shoulders and gave her a friendly squeeze.

Like that was supposed to help? There was more than friendship in that squeeze. The press of his body against hers sent a wave of warmth washing through her. Great. Now she had heated hormones to deal with along with her abject horror of discovery. She didn’t know which was worse, worrying whether her and Roland’s identities would be outed, or the driver’s.

I will never, ever pray for anything ever again, she vowed silently. It always backfired on her. She’d wanted Robin Hood. She got him. And look where that landed her. Then, because of the where, she’d begged heaven for some passing transport to give them a lift back to the manor—a wagon, a cart, an SUV—she hadn’t cared what. She’d been terrified of what might happen if she and Roland walked home on the forest road by themselves. What if outlaws accosted them on the way? What if one outlaw in particular chanced to cross their path?

It had seemed a godsend when this wagon appeared—until she realized who held the reins. Her gaze flashed skyward an instant. *Someone up there hates me.*

To the left of her, Jonathon Little, clad in Lincoln green from head to toe, his red hair and beard burning like fire in the late afternoon sun, cleared his throat and burst forth with a lusty ballad of drinking, wenching, and other naughty deeds. A real man’s tune.

Marian nearly dropped her teeth when Roland, to her right, joined in, his husky baritone harmonizing with Jon’s deep bass. Where on earth did her genteel scholar-earl learn a song like this? Heck, probably the same place he learned how to play butcher. Very versatile was Lord Roland, a man of many surprises. She just hoped he’d not be surprised himself.

Little Jon and the Sheriff of Nottingham alone together in Sherwood wasn’t overly healthy for the latter—at least not in the legends. In some of the stories, Jon had more dealings with the sheriff than Robin Hood did, and gave him more grief. Not always though. In one tale, Little Jon was captured and almost hanged. This situation wasn’t healthy for him either.

She heaved an inward sigh. *Friar Tuck, Mutch the Miller’s Son, Allan-a-Dale (or Allan of Wales—whatever), Will Scarlet, even Sir Guy of Gisbourne (gag)* ... All legendary names. All real, she now knew. She should have expected an encounter with Little Jon, especially after almost seeing him at the faire. Traditionally, his character was second only to the Hooded Man himself, a big part of the myth. Very big.

She shot a sideways glance at him. Cripes, he was huge.

And hugely happy. She couldn’t shake the suspicion he’d guessed who they were and was just playing along for sport. Or with intent to do mischief. Or both. For all the joviality, there’d been an undercurrent of tension throughout the ride. Her breath blew out in audible relief when the tower of the manor house appeared through the trees just as the song ended.

“Glad ’tis over, are ye? Hah! Me singing ain’t that bad.” Jon slapped her on the back, playfully. A wee tap for him. On the receiving end, it felt like a brick between the shoulder blades.

Gasp. Marian grabbed onto the edge of the seat to keep from flying headfirst out of the wagon. She stopped. Her cap didn’t. A riot of curls tumbled out over her face as Roland’s hand whipped out, snatching the cap from mid-air and popping it back onto her head.

Yikes, in the dictionary under “fast” it must say: See him. Had dictionaries been invented yet? Never mind!

While struggling through cardiac arrest, she somehow managed to stuff all her hair up out of sight in a record breaking five seconds flat. Okay, so she was fast, too.

Can I faint now?

Breathless, expecting the worst, expecting at least a raised eyebrow, she glanced at Jon to see him doubled over, staring fixedly under the wagon seat—at what, only he knew. Hell, he’d missed the whole damn show. She could have taken an extra few seconds and still had time to spare. Bummer. She’d wasted a perfectly good panic attack for nothing.

Or maybe not. She jumped when his foot lifted and slammed down with a thunderous thud, shaking the wagon and startling his two horses into a trot.

“Take that, you!” he proclaimed without specifying what the “you” had been. He straightened up and reined in his team to a halt, then turned and met her gaze. His eyes narrowed. “I hate bugs,” he said, sounding quite vehement about it.

“Me, too,” was all she could answer. A lie. She didn’t particularly like bugs, but as long as they weren’t actively crawling on her, she could deal with them. Unfortunately, it felt like some were crawling on her right then. A weird prickle crept over her. She wasn’t the only one lying. He’d staged his little show to cover hers. He didn’t want them to know he’d seen. Yup, the man was definitely playing along with their charade. Why?

Seemingly oblivious to her anxiety, Roland climbed out of the wagon and helped her down to stand beside him. He smiled. “My thanks to you, Jonathon Little, for saving our shoe leather, but we can walk from here. Our cottage lies close.”

He could say that again. The “cottage” was within shouting distance—along with several score armed men. Which must be the reason for Jon’s playing along at this point, regardless of the original impetus. If he knew for sure now that Mr. Butcher was the new sheriff, he’d want to get rid of them and get out while the going was still good. The only question left was whether or not the sheriff would let him. *Did* Roland have any inkling they’d been driven home by a wood-devil?

Yeah, right, fat chance. She gave herself a mental shake. Roland couldn’t know or he’d never have risked the ride in the first place. She was just being paranoid because *she* knew.

“As ye will,” Jon said. “But the thanks be all mine.” His eyes touched hers. “I’ve enjoyed the company, I have.”

How odd. He sounded like he meant that. A lump rose in her throat as she watched him gather up his reins, making ready to be off. When she’d first read the legends as a little girl, Little Jon had been her favorite character next to Robin Hood. Seeing him now, larger than life, she realized he still was. What a darn shame they’d never have the chance to know each other better. What a lot she was giving up for Roland. Yes, he was worth every bit of it and more, but that didn’t mean the sacrifice was easy. Just that she loved him enough to make it, loved him so much

she'd rip her heart to shreds for him. She was doing it right now.

On a sudden impulse, she grabbed the side of the wagon and hauled herself back onto the seat next to Jon, kneeling on it to bring her face on level with his. His bushy red brows rose in shock. Good thing he knew she wasn't a boy or he'd be more shocked in a moment. She couldn't risk a face-to-face meeting with Robin to tell him good-bye, but Little Jon was here in front of her. She'd never forgive herself if she didn't seize this opportunity to tell him. So long as she did it quickly and quietly, it ought to be safe.

"I just wanted to say thank you." Not for the nerve-wracking ride, but for all the hours she'd spent with him in the yellowed pages of *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, the tattered volume she'd retreated to every time her uncle hit her, every time she felt lonely and frightened and sad. A lot of time.

"Thank you, and farewell. Take care of yourself. I...I won't be seeing you again." Before he could respond, she took his big bearded face in her hands and kissed him—twice—once on each furry cheek. "One for you, Little Jon, and one for...a friend," she whispered, hoping he'd realize the friend she meant. "Give it to him for me, please. And tell him I...I—"

Standing on the ground several paces behind her, Roland coughed. Loudly.

So much for the message she'd hoped to send. Just as well probably, since she hadn't a clue what to say. Besides, she was delaying Jon in what was dangerous territory for him. The poor man was blushing redder than his hair. She gave him a weak smile by way of apology and slipped off the seat to vacate the wagon once more. Roland met her at the edge, his smile frozen stiffly on his face, a hint of anger in his eyes.

Uh-oh.

Like a defensive linesman recovering a fumbled ball, Jon beamed him a broad grin. "'Tis an affectionate boy ye have here, butcher...once he forgets to be shy."

"Mmm, yes, that's a hope I've been hanging on to," Roland murmured. The glint in his gaze softened as he reached up and lifted her down. His arm dropped about her shoulders, holding her firmly against his side, as though he were afraid she might bolt for the wagon again and try to run off.

Hah. In another life perhaps, but not now. She trembled inside at the thought of the coming night when she'd tell him that.

Jon shot her a wink. "Ne're ye fear, we'll meet again ere long. No doubt I'll see ye tomorrow in Nottingham Town for the archery."

"No doubt," Roland said dryly.

Crap, she'd almost forgotten. Marian stiffened. Just because the coming contest was no trap didn't make it no risk. To sit there on display next to Roland, watching and wondering if Robin Hood was among the archers... Even if nothing happened, the wear and tear on her emotions would be brutal.

Nope, let Lady Isolde deal with the oxen.

"Um, no, I've had my faire-day. I won't be going tomorrow."

Jon let out a bark of laughter. "Then ye'll be the only one in the shire who's not. For a gold arrow, every man who can draw a bow will be shooting, and all else will be there to watch."

Roland's arm tightened spastically around her.

"G-gold arrow?" Her voice cracked on the words. "I...I thought the prize was...a pair of oxen."

"'Twas." Jon nodded. "But it seems our new sheriff decided to raise the stakes." He flashed a knife-edged glance at Roland. "Some say he's baiting a trap,

that it matters not how many enter—there be only one man sure to out-shoot the rest. Some say the good sheriff will have his own men hidden through the crowd... with orders to arrest whoever wins.”

Roland sent him a grim smile back. “Some may well be right.”

“Aye, and some need to have their bow broken over their head.” With an angry snort, Jon snapped his reins and rumbled off down the road, like he’d suddenly remembered an appointment he was late for.

Marian stared after him. *I don’t believe it.* An open attempt at capture, yes. But this? *Of all the dirty, rotten...* Hiding men in the crowd, like some kind of medieval undercover cops? That must break every rule of chivalry in the book. Even the larcenous sheriff of the legends had never tried anything *this* sneaky.

Furious, she shoved out from under Roland’s arm and glared glaciers at him. “When were you going to tell me? *Were* you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?” Almost too calmly he met her glare, his expression smooth, cool as marble—and just as hard. “I told you yesterday I’m under orders from the king. I’ve a job to do. What else do you need to know? This is men’s business, my lady, and no concern of yours.”

“The hell it’s not.” A sudden chill swept her. There was more at work here than “king’s orders.” Did he really care that much about catching an outlaw? Or... did he think he was removing a rival?

Oh damn. She resisted the urge to bury her face in her hands. *This is all my fault.* He had no rival. He just didn’t know that yet.

I have to stop him. She’d started this mess; she could end it.

“Roland, you can’t go through with this. It’s wrong!” *I’ve been wrong.* Desperation building, she stared up at him. “You don’t have to—”

“Enough!” He sliced her off, his tone sharp as a sword strike. Not the Roland she was used to, neither the gentle scholar nor the aggravating aristocrat—not even the bawdy butcher. This Roland had an edge she’d never felt before. She flinched as he stepped forward and stood towering over her.

“What I *don’t* have to do is discuss this with you, lady, especially not out here. I am tired and dirty and I have a busy day on the morrow to prepare for. I want a bath and proper clothes, and...” His eyes gleamed down pure danger. “I want my wife looking like a woman again.” He gripped her upper arm, not roughly, but not allowing any room for argument either. “We are going to the house. Now. You may go with me on your own feet or over my shoulder. Which shall it be?”

Say what? Desperation warred with sudden anger. The anger won. If there was one thing she’d been learning recently, it was that she didn’t *have* to take bullying, not from anyone. Maid Marian was turning into Joan of Arc.

She planted her feet and narrowed her gaze. “Who the hell do you think you are to talk to me like that?”

“Your husband.” He pulled her forward and up. Raw emotion thickened his voice. “And a man who loves you more than his own life.” Moving fast, he marched off the road onto the long driveway to the manor house.

Marian groaned—and not from the shock of finding herself staring at the ground down the length of his lean muscled back. He loved her. She’d figured that, but she’d never heard him say it aloud...till now. Chinese fireworks exploded in her head. (Well, probably they were Chinese; she didn’t think they had fireworks in England yet.) Her heart nearly burst with the rockets and the bombs.

“I love you, too,” she tried to say.

It came out sounding like “Mmph-hmph-oovfh.”

Tricky thing, speech, when you were bouncing against a rock-hard shoulder like a sack of grain. Roland must have thought she was complaining about the ride.

“’Twas your choice, sweetheart,” he said, never breaking stride.

A fresh groan escaped her lips. If he only knew. Yes, her choice. Her painful, poignant, perplexing choice. She’d made it and she’d stick by it no matter what. *He* was her choice.

But if he thought this “discussion” was over, he’d better think again. She hadn’t even started yet.

Marian hit the floor with a grunt when Roland swung her down just inside the great hall. She wobbled a moment, catching her breath and her balance. A high-pitched screech pierced her eardrums, almost knocking her off her feet again. Mercy, did that come out of Lady Isolde? Amazing. She’d never before realized that one could screech with a French accent. The woman’s smooth *savoir faire* had certainly been shattered by their appearance.

“Roland!” Isolde’s hands flew to her mouth in horror. Her nose wrinkled in disgust. “You...you...”

“I know. I look like a common tradesman. We’ve been a-fairing.” He didn’t bother to elaborate. Dusting off his dignity, he hauled Marian out from behind himself. She’d lost her cap halfway down the driveway and her hair stood out in rollicking disarray. Besides which she was covered in road grit and...well, dressed in Hodge’s old clothes, of course.

Lady Isolde took one look and let loose another brain-scrambling screech. She clutched her bosom as though having some kind of attack, then turned and bellowed at the top of her lungs, “*Solemniaaaaa...*”

Gee, swell. Bath time with Giggles.

An arduous task as it turned out...

Fetch hot water. Fill basin. Scrub. Repeat first three steps till all skin is pink and glowing. Pat dry, apply scented oil, bring clean shift, clean stockings, find slippers, a gown—the blue silk. Where’s the belt? No, not that one, the one with the sapphires. It matches her eyes. Doesn’t she look lovely?

Solemnia worked feverishly, giggling like a hyena the whole time. At least she seemed to be enjoying herself. Lady Isolde supervised—the job, apparently, being too big to be trusted to Solemnia alone. Marian discovered exactly how a Barbie doll must feel. God forbid she lift a finger to wash or dress herself.

Twenty years later, or maybe it was only an hour, she sat in the bedchamber, primed and perfumed within an inch of her life, everything done but her hair. They’d been saving the worst for last. Before her stood a small table supporting a large oval of polished silver. Behind her stood Solemnia, and behind her Isolde, the former struggling to tame an unruly tangle of auburn locks while the latter made sure she did it right.

“No, no, no—long, sweeping strokes—to make it shine.”

The technique clashed with the rowdy curls in question, but try to tell Isolde that. The curls’ owner watched the women in the metal mirror and hung on to the sides of the tabletop, trying to avoid whiplash.

The door quietly opened and closed, a cat-like tread crossed the floor, and a new figure appeared in the silver oval—tall and poised, immaculate in his white wool King David robe, and sizzling with sensuality. The edge of the table dug into

Marian's palms as her grip hardened on it. She tried to smile. It looked more like a wince.

"You silly goose, you are hurting her. Let me do it." Isolde plucked the comb from Solemnia.

"No, let me." Roland plucked the comb from Isolde.

"Eeeek!" She hadn't known he was there.

Solemnia giggled at Isolde's startled squeak, which made Isolde shoot Solemnia a dirty look that sent her scurrying from the room, giggling harder. She didn't even wait for her lord's dismissal.

He shook his head at her departure. "I keep hoping she'll cheer up one of these days. 'Tis a pity to see her so sad all the time."

Isolde landed a light slap on his face. "And you are too silent, *mon chere*. I shall have to bell you like a pussycat so I know when you are near." She frowned slightly, rubbing her fingertips across the dark stubble on his cheek. "You are growing fuzzy as a cat, no?"

"Yes. But 'tis a temporary condition only. Rather like your presence in this chamber. Hmm?" He gave her a smile, one of his best.

Gazing into the mirror, studying the interaction behind her, Marian felt her heart hitch. The heck with charming birds out of the trees. Roland's smile at its best could charm the trees out from under the birds. It charmed Isolde out of the room right then, which was almost as miraculous.

The woman's eyes slanted from Roland to Marian and back.

"Ahhh," she said. It spoke volumes. She was French, after all. Not Norman-French. French-French. She'd been born in Paris and had once served at the French royal court. One could only imagine *how* she'd served.

A sly grin curled her lips. "Very well, *mon chere*, I shall leave the rest to you." With a throaty chuckle, she moved to the door, swishing her hips in the way she was famous for. "Just remember that Solemnia and I have put much effort into dressing your lady. You must not disarrange our work *too* soon. Enjoy the view for a bit."

"Thank you, Aunt. I intend to."

Marian's hackles rose. She waited for the sound of the door shutting behind Isolde, then twisted around to confront him. "You know, I really don't appreciate being talked about like I'm not even in the room—"

She broke off. Um...she was speaking into his middle, her nose scant inches from his sash. When had he moved in so close? Quickly she turned back to the mirror, saw a blush reddening her own face and the glimmer of a grin on his. This wasn't funny, darn it.

Roland rested a hand on the back of her chair. "I'm sorry if that's how it seemed. 'Twasn't meant so. I assure you, I've been *very* aware of your presence."

His eyes met hers full on in the mirror. Even in reflection his gaze hit her like an electric shock. Warm tingles started in her stomach and spread outward.

No. She wasn't dealing with this now. They had a "discussion" to continue. If he hoped Solemnia had scrubbed the worries out of her head along with the dirt off her skin, he was going to be very disappointed.

She buried her hands in her lap, fidgeting with the long ends of her jeweled belt, absently running the gold links and smooth sapphire cabochons through her fingers to steady herself, to help organize her thoughts.

"I hope you weren't planning on braids," Roland said. "I don't do braids, I'm afraid." Gently, carefully, he began combing her hair.

Marian almost snapped a link. And the belt didn't fare much better. "S-stop that. We need to talk."

"We are talking." He continued combing.

She continued torturing her belt. "You know what I mean."

"Perhaps. But if you're referring to my plans for the morrow, that subject is closed, sweetheart." He glanced up from his work to smile at her in the mirror. "I'm willing to discuss almost anything else, however."

A cabochon popped out of its setting and landed on the floor with a dull ping.

He knelt briefly to retrieve it, laying it on the table as he stood back up. "Never mind. We can easily have it reset."

"Can we have your brain reset while we're at it?" She scowled at his reflection. How could he look so wonderful and still be so aggravating? Heat and cold shivered through her at once—the warmth of love tangled with a desperate chill. She should tell him she loved him. She should tell him now.

She couldn't. Not like this, not while she wanted to smack him at the same time. She couldn't say the words in anger. She'd choke on them and he'd never believe her. She'd just make things worse. She stared at herself in the mirror, stared at him. A flushed, anxious woman stared back, and a man in a marble-smooth mask. Marian fought an impulse to swing around and slap it off his face.

"Roland, you can't be serious." *You're a nice man, darn it.* Nice men didn't do things like this. "Robin Hood's no ordinary criminal. He *helps* people. You saw how those children acted today. He's a hero to them."

"Mmm, yes, them and others...so I've heard." A warning note crept into his voice, letting her know who one of those "others" was. And letting her know how he felt about it—not kindly. "But that's not the issue. Regardless of the why, the man's a notorious thief. And I've the law to enforce."

"Not this way." Forget the politics of the problem, she was talking about honor. Roland's honor. "Where's your sense of fair play? A man's *life* is a stake. A good man. And you're hardly giving him a chance. If Robin is captured, you know he's almost sure to be executed."

"Small chance of that, I think." He swept the comb through her hair one last time, then laid it on the table with a warning click.

A chill prickled down her spine. "What do you mean? He won't be captured? Or he won't be executed if he is?"

"Neither. And both."

What the hell did that mean? She studied his reflection, saw his gaze narrow and his lips curve into a small grin. A cold fist suddenly clutched her heart.

Oh no...

Like the rasp of sandpaper, she heard her own voice. "You don't plan to take him alive, do you? Your men have orders to kill him on the spot—is that it? Whoever wins the contest will just be slaughtered right there where they stand?"

His grin tightened into a hard line. Answer enough.

She grabbed the front edge of the table for support, fought back a wave of nausea. Good God, if this didn't prove how much she loved him, nothing would. *Him.* Not the outlaw hero, but the paradoxical and very human earl, feet-of-clay and all. If she didn't love him so much, she wouldn't be so horribly disgusted with him now.

She *had* to stop this. Not just for Robin's sake, but for Roland's. He was *not* thinking clearly. He was acting out of anger and jealousy. He'd regret it later, regret it when it was too late to fix. It would hang over them like an evil black cloud. If

Robin Hood died tomorrow, any chance for happiness they had would die with him.

She gripped the table tighter, tried not to look too frantic as she stared hard into the cool reflection of Roland's eyes. "How can you be sure you'll even get the right man? What if Robin doesn't show? What if he knows it's a trap? Someone else will win and you'll kill *them*. Wrongly."

His reflection stared back, impossibly unperturbed. "Oh, I've no doubt we'll net the right bird. He'll enter the match for the sport of pitting his wits against me and my men if nothing else."

Yeah, that's what she thought, too. She'd just been hoping Roland wouldn't think it. Her shoulders slumped with dejection. Robin Hood must know what was up. Little Jon knew, so Robin would. If he held to his traditional character—and he had so far—the challenge of a trap would lure him more than the bait. But even Robin Hood must have off days.

"Damn it, even if he *is* there, you still can't be certain he'll win." In frustration, she balled her hands into fists and pounded them down, shaking the table and knocking the mirror askew.

Ouch.

Roland reached around her to straighten it, enclosing her in the circle of his arms. He held the pose even after the mirror was righted, his face lowered, inhaling her scent. His breath whispered out with his words, feathering her hair.

"I'm not worried, sweetheart. All know Robin is the best. Don't you remember how he even shot a knife out of the air?"

A knife... She felt one stabbing into her stomach, heard a clatter inside her head. The sound of a thousand puzzle pieces falling into place.

Breathe, Marian.

With what? Her lungs had stalled. Cold covered her like a cloak, then flared into flame. Staring into the mirror, she watched the color flood into her face even as it drained out of his. Clever man. He realized what he'd just said. He realized she realized it, too. She smiled at him. Grimly. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Yes, I remember." *Now* she remembered. Now it was all coming back, all she'd forgotten, crashing in on her—he had no idea how much. Then again, maybe he did. He stood frozen in position, his arms still reaching around her, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the mirror like it was a tiger he'd caught by the tail and he didn't dare let go. She felt his body heat, smelled his scent—spicy clean, warm and woodsy. That scent was something else she remembered, something she *should* have remembered before now—something she *would* have remembered if it hadn't been just too godawful unbelievable.

Suddenly she couldn't blame him for wanting to kill Robin Hood. Suddenly she wanted to kill Robin Hood herself. Because Robin Hood was standing right behind her. Damn him.

With a vicious heave, she shoved away from the table, pushing back so sharply, the chair almost mowed him down. The mirror snapped off in his hands, going with him as he jumped clear.

"I remember. I'm just surprised *you* remember." Still smiling, Marian rose from the chair and faced him. She saw his mind working frantically, trying to pull his mask back into place.

Too late, chum. She'd already cracked it. He'd never wear that mask again, not with her.

Pure panic lit his eyes. "Um...didn't you tell me about the knife?"

"Nice try." Her smile turned to a snarl. "But I don't think so. I'm pretty sure I haven't told *anyone* about it."

“Only pretty sure?” He looked hopeful.

“Make that *very* sure.” Breathing fire, she advanced on him as he retreated backward across the room, clutching the mirror in front of himself like a shield. Yeah, he needed one.

“And I seriously doubt Sir Guy would have told you. What would he say?” She pitched her voice an octave lower to mimic the man. ““Oh, by the way, Lord Roland, I tried to murder your wife the other night, but that bastard Robin Hood stopped me.””

“That’s it! By God, lady, you sounded just like him.” Diehard bravado halted Roland short in his retreat.

He just *had* to make one more try, didn’t he?

Marian slammed her palms against the mirror covering his chest, knocking him a stumbling step back. “Stop it! The game’s over.” Furiously, she glared at him. “There are only three people who could possibly know what happened that night. It was too dark for anyone else to see, and everyone was too busy being hysterical to notice what was going on anyway.”

She felt a little hysterical herself right now. So did Roland, by the look of him. She snapped her hand up in the air, cutting him off when he tried to speak.

“No. It was just me, the one who threw the knife...and the one who shot it out of the air.” She gave him a merciless grin. “Now, I know you’re not me, and you bathe too often to be Sir Guy. So...” Her voice lowered ominously. “Who does that make you?”

“The biggest fool in the kingdom.” With a heavy sigh, Roland lowered his shield, surrendered. An amazing feat for him.

Marian almost surrendered as well, to the pleading in his eyes. Almost. Something stopped her—an awful sense of betrayal, a sickening sense of hurt, humiliation and shock. How *could* he? Damn him and Robin Hood both.

“Do you have *any* idea of the absolute *hell* you’ve put me through?” Choking on her own spleen, she charged for the door. It was either that or knee him in the groin, and the thick folds of her gown restricted leg movement.

Roland charged after her, tossing his makeshift shield aside on the way. It landed on the floor with a reverberating metallic twang as he landed between her and the exit.

“Do you think I’ve enjoyed not telling you?” His gaze desperate, he blocked her escape. “Lady, I’ve been miserable.”

“Good.” She elbowed him in the ribs and darted out while he was doubled over, gasping for breath.

He caught her again at the base of the stairs in the courtyard, having leapt the last dozen steps to reach the bottom before her.

“Careful,” she warned. “Your *swashbuckle* is showing.”

He glanced nervously over his shoulder to see if anyone had, indeed, seen his leap—which allowed her time to duck under his arm, race across the yard and reach the inner entrance to the great hall just a heartbeat ahead of him. A short-lived victory. He grabbed her by the shoulders, halting her as her foot touched the threshold. She struggled to pull loose.

“Marian, please—”

They both stopped, straightened, and pasted on smiles as Father Boniface approached, on a beeline for the nearest necessary. Scarcely breaking stride, the old priest blessed them and hurried past.

Roland tried again. “Lady, will you listen to—”

A guard brushed by, coming in. Then two more, going out...several serving men, a few grooms, a kitchen boy, a tradesman... Rush hour traffic, and this with half the Hunterdons still at the faire. All paused to pay homage, all desired to know if their lord and lady required anything.

"A little privacy would be nice," Roland muttered.

He lowered his head to whisper in Marian's ear. She shivered as his breath tickled her neck, tensed as his hands massaged her shoulders. He'd probably been hoping for the opposite effect when he started that.

"Sweetheart, we can't talk here. Come back to the room. Please. We need to discuss this."

She twisted away from him. "Oh sure, *now* you want to talk. When *I* wanted to discuss things, it was Lord Tight-Lips."

"I was *going* to tell you, I swear it."

Her eyes bore into his. "When?"

He swallowed, hard. "Um...tomorrow. After—"

"*After*? After you staged a..." She felt her eyes pop, heard her voice growing shrill, too loud. "You were going to let me witness that...that horrible joke? When you knew how I felt about—"

The giant wooden door at the opposite end of the hall banged open with a thunderous thud and the enraged shriek of a jungle beast split the air.

Cymrica was home.

"She took the words right out of my mouth." With an angry swish of silk, Marian spun about and swept down the hall toward the caterwauling.

Roland followed more slowly, his voice a low groan. "I don't think I'll wait till tomorrow. It might be easier if I just kill myself now."

Another screech shattered their eardrums.

"Unhand me, you...you..."

"No! Not the lute—"

Craaack! Splinter! Sproinggg...

Will Scarlet was back, too, looking a little the worse for the wear. He was, of course, in no danger after all from the new sheriff. The sheriff's sister, however, was another story. The minstrel hung onto her wrist with one hand while brushing off lute shards with the other. His cap must have cushioned the blow, but that red feather would ne're be the same. He glanced up at Roland's approach. "She was... reluctant to return."

"I guessed that." Roland eyed Cymrica, who was hissing and spitting like a cat and clawing at Will's hand in a futile attempt to break free. "A little nervous about meeting her suitor, is she?"

Will gave him a sour grin. "I had to drag her all the way from Nottingham Town to get her home for you."

Roland grinned back, wickedly. "Not for me, lad."

Her face flushed, kerchief askew and braids unraveling, Cymrica shot both of them blistering glares. "All you men always stick together."

"*Unhh...*" Will grunted as she spun about and kicked him in the shin. "She's angry because I'd not simply run off with her from the faire," he said, hopping on one foot.

Roland snorted. "Hah, you call this angry? Wait till you've seen her in a *real* temper." He grabbed Cymrica's other wrist to keep her from launching a second kick. "Wait, wench, don't you at least want to meet the man who's asked for your hand? He's here now, as I said he'd be. But recently arrived, in fact."

Strung between them like a clothesline, she screamed bloody murder. “*Nooo!* I told you, I’ll not have him! You promised you’d not make me.” Frantically, she stared at Roland. “*You promised!*”

“True, I did.” He shrugged and fixed his gaze on Will. “I’m sorry, Lord William. You heard the lady. She refuses your offer. Nothing I can do about it, I’m afraid. I did promise I’d not force her to wed you.” He glanced at Cymrica. “Happy now?”

She went white as a sheet. Her lower lip quivered. Her dark eyes flashed from one man to the other. “L-Lord William?”

“William of Gamewell, only son and heir to his father’s estates,” Roland elaborated. “It seems he wasn’t overly enthralled by his family’s choices of a bride for him—scorned one after another. His father lost patience and finally gave him leave to find his own.”

“Aye,” Will said. “As a minstrel I’ve had chance to visit every great house from London to York and observe the ladies with small fear of any suggesting a, um, permanent alliance.”

Cymrica narrowed her gaze at him. “Meaning you wished to sample the milk without worrying if you need buy the cow. Men! Do you not think ’tis rather cheeky to assume anyone would even *want* to marry you?”

“Can I help it if I’m irresistible?” He gave her a slow, sleepy grin and tugged her free from Roland so he could hold both her hands in his. “In truth, my lady, I’ve sampled plenty. I’ve seen many a fair face, tasted many a sweet pair of lips.” His eyes looked deep into hers. “I’ve met many I liked, but none I loved...till I found you.”

Cymrica let out a long, breathy sigh. A shiver shook her from stem to stern. Visibly trembling, she twisted about to look at Roland. “May I change my mind on that refusal?”

“’Tis your choice, little sister.”

“*Yesss!*” Her joyous shriek rattled the rafters of the great hall. Cheers rang out from two score assorted onlookers as Cymrica hurled herself into Will’s arms, almost bowling him over with the force of her kiss.

Roland stepped forward to clap him on the back. “You wanted her, lad—you’ve got her. *Good luck.*”

Marian’s spine stiffened as he turned his gaze to her, an inner heat gleaming out of his eyes, the hint of a tease in his expression. The hint of a plea, too.

“There, you see.” He moved close to whisper. “That’s how a woman ought to respond when a man uncovers his secrets to her.”

Bull. “You haven’t uncovered anything to me. I had to figure it out on my own.”

“Is that the only problem?” The heat in his gaze increased. “Return to the room with me and I’ll be happy to *uncover* whatever you like.”

“Yeah, that’s your answer to everything, isn’t it?” Ducking around him, she darted for the hall’s huge front door. “When all else fails, try seduction!”

“What’s wrong with seduction?” Roland asked as he chased after her.

“Not a damn thing that I know of,” Will said as they passed by him and Cymrica. He winked at Marian and smirked at Roland. “You’d best take back your luck,” he told him. “Methinks you’ll be needing it more than myself.”

“Methinks so, too,” Roland muttered.

Marian put on an extra burst of speed to beat him to the door.

Outside the setting sun had dipped below the treetops, turning the manor grounds into a patchwork of dusky shadows and rosy gold glow. The sky shaded

from blue to lavender to pink on the horizon, and a breeze mingled the mulchy smell of deep woods with the sweet scent of open meadow and field.

Marian paused long enough to gather up her skirts for running, then tore down the drive. She had no idea where she went. To the forest to look for Robin Hood? *Ha-ha*. She choked on a surge of hysterical laughter. For the first time in her life she was running *from* Robin, not to him. What a weird feeling.

She heard him a few paces behind, hardly trying to catch her, just keep her in range, like they were out for an evening jog or something. What did he think he was doing, testing her stamina? Maybe he was waiting for her to tire herself out so he could sling her over his shoulder again and haul her back to the house? And maybe she was just plain stupid to be running from him in the first place.

Okay, okay—*yes*—they needed to talk. Sheesh. She slammed on the brakes and spun about, red-faced and panting.

He stopped short an arm's length away, barely winded.

"Roland, *what* are we doing?"

"You tell me."

"I don't—" She broke off as he stared suddenly at something behind her, his expression a blend of mute horror and pained resignation, like a man on the way to the gallows.

Oh no. What now? Expecting to see the worst without any clue what the worst might be, she turned around and followed his gaze.

A small cart had just turned off the forest road onto the long driveway. Three figures sat in the front, large, medium, and small. Not the Three Bears. As the cart drew closer she recognized the large figure as the muscle-bound, muscle-brained Diccon, the faire-ward Roland had spoken to. The medium one was the warder she'd hired. And between the two men, looking utterly unrepentant and pouting up a storm sat...

Heart pounding, she raced down the drive and met the cart halfway, startling the horse. Diccon reined it up. Her faire-ward doffed his cap and gave her a small, seated bow and a big, beaming smile. He was missing a tooth, she noticed, but it didn't detract from his charm. She was so grateful she'd have kissed him if she could have managed the climb into the cart in her gown. Scarcely had things come to a halt when the middle figure scrambled over the man and hopped down.

Marian grabbed the child into a tight embrace. *Orlando*—no doubt about it. There couldn't possibly be two boys in the world this beautiful. "Are you all right?"

Before she could get an answer, Roland stalked up, looking positively lethal. His eyes shot poison darts at the figure in her arms. What the hell was his problem? He was a fine one to be ruffled by a little thievery. Lord Pot calling the kettle black.

She pushed her young charge behind herself and whispered, "Stay there and keep quiet. Don't worry, you're safe now. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."

When Roland opened his mouth to speak, she stopped him with a saccharine smile. "Pay the man, dear." She nodded toward the medium faire-ward. "I hired him to do a job and he's just delivered."

"I should have suspected as much," Roland said through clenched teeth.

Holding himself on a short leash, he had a hurried and hushed conversation with the two warders, during which a handful of coins changed ownership, then sent the men on their way. The moment they were out of sight, he turned and advanced on Marian, who stood like a lioness guarding her cub. His dark eyes blazed—but not at her. She felt her cub peeking out from behind her. Roland's glare was directed at the angel face in the hood. His voice came out in a growl.

“What do you have to say for yourself? Rascal! I ought to whip the hide off your little tail.”

“Over my dead body!” Mama lioness growled back. She flung out her paw, halting him when he reached for the figure cowering against her spine. “This child is my friend, and I love him. A lot. Whatever he’s done, it’s no worse than things you’ve done yourself, so *back off*, buster. I’m keeping him with me from now on. *I’ll* be responsible for him. Got it? Wherever I live, he lives. You don’t like it, tough shit.”

Like the walls of Jericho at a trumpet blast, Roland’s anger crumbled. The expression in his eyes melted into something tender and tortured at once, like a man racked between heaven and hell. Simultaneously the child dashed out from behind her and caught him around the waist in a hard hug, hanging on like a leach.

“There! You see? *Now* may I stay home? Please, please, *pleeeeee*? I already know Latin as well as you. How much more must I learn? I’m so bloody sick of Greek and geometry I could vomit. Don’t send me back to the abbey. ’Tis horrid! The sisters all look like they’ve been eating sour pudding, and they smell like it, too. They never let me have any fun. I hate it! If you send me back, I’ll just run away again.”

The small face tilted to peer up at him.

The hood fell back.

And the bottom dropped out of Marian with the cascade of long black curls that spilled out.

In numb shock she stared at the child. So like Orlando. And so not. Not even a boy.

Roland heaved a gut-wrenching sigh. He pried the girl off himself and turned her around, resting his hands on her shoulders. “Allow me to present my daughter... Stacey of the *Mouth*.”

“Well, we know who she gets that from, don’t we?” Marian offered him a grim smile. Of all the thoughts spinning her head, only one stood out in stark relief, just a curious little scrap of trivia concerning names, the fact that “Roland” was the French version of “Orlando.” Why hadn’t she thought of that before? Why hadn’t he *told* her?

She glanced down at the hopeful young face, struggled to keep her voice calm for Stacey’s sake. “I’m glad to finally meet you, dear. You’re a beautiful girl.” *And you remind me so much of someone else I used to know.* “I...I hope you don’t mind, but I think you and your father may as well go back to the house without me. You two must have a lot to talk about, and I... Right now I think I need a walk.” *A long one.*

Her eyes flashed up into Roland’s, blue ice glinting out of a frost-pale face. “Don’t expect me back any time soon.”

Without another word she marched down the length of the drive, across the road, and straight into the forest.

Chapter 15

An inner magnet drew her to the spot. She found her way by the last rays of the sun—gone now. No matter. She'd seen enough to know where she was. Small comfort, for she knew nothing else. Feeling like one big question mark, she sat with her back against a giant oak and stared through the dark to just a few days before when she'd first landed on this particular patch of earth with a sweet-faced, smart-mouthed little boy. Who no longer existed. He'd grown into a man overnight, it seemed. He was older than she now—a phenomenon that felt weirder than the time-jump. She couldn't decide which disturbed her more, that he hadn't told her, or that she'd never see the boy Orlando again. He'd been such an adorable kid, darn it.

She ran her fingers over a piece of wood in her lap, a stubby length of tree branch salvaged from the forest floor—possibly the same stick he'd picked up to defend her from wolves. She gripped it the same way he had, remembering.

Her hands clenched convulsively when a shadow slipped out of the trees. Tall, hooded, silent as a wraith.

"You wouldn't talk to Roland. I wondered if Robin might have better luck winning your ear?"

A question. And a poignant offering on his part since he didn't know she'd already chosen the man over the myth. Sitting here, it had occurred to her what a curious quandary he'd been battling himself recently. "Lord Roland" genuinely had been jealous of her feelings for "Robin Hood," as odd as that sounded now. Of course, he *could* have avoided that problem by explaining things up front, right?

Damn straight he could have. She strangled her tree branch. This little charade was really wearing thin. "I hate to tell you this, but Robin is near the top of my feces-list, too. As far as I'm concerned, you and Lord Roland can *both* go hang yourselves."

"Oh." He hovered uncertainly before her. "Well, then how about if I just sit quietly nearby? Honestly, I can't let you stay here alone, unprotected." The hint of a grin crept into his tone. "Aren't you afraid the wolves will get you?"

The furry ones or the two-legged variety? How about the one in the hood standing over her right now? She raised her stick and waved it under his nose. "It's okay. I'm armed."

"What do you think you're going to do with that? Teach them to play fetch?"

He remembered. That was exactly what she'd told Orlando. It had been only days ago for her, but years for him. And he remembered. A pang struck her as she quoted the boy's response. "Ha-ha. Glad you still got your sense of humor."

"I wasn't trying to be funny," he said, continuing verbatim with the replayed dialog.

"I know. That's why I ain't laughing," she said, her voice catching as she completed it.

His voice grew huskier as he sat beside her. "Wasn't it soon after that we were nearly run over by Elaine and I grabbed you and pulled you to the ground? I've always regretted I didn't take proper advantage of that situation." He slid closer. "Shall we continue our re-run? With a few embellishments perhaps? I've learned so much since I was twelve."

She scooted away from him. "Um, no, I think we should quit while we're ahead."

"If you say so." With a small sigh he sank back against their tree. "All right, since we seem to have finished our little romp down memory lane, why don't we talk about the things we *need* to be talking about?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I can do that yet." Not calmly anyway. "What are the alternatives?" She meant, of course, alternate topics of conversation.

"I could make mad, passionate love to you instead," he suggested.

Marian fought a sudden, brief battle to keep from choking. If she choked, he might pound her on the back. Which would require that he *touch* her. "Okay, let's talk."

"As you wish." She heard the grin in his voice again. "And *then* I'll make mad, passionate love to you."

Persistent, wasn't he?

"*That* will depend on how well the discussion goes." She felt a grin stealing onto her own lips, in spite of herself. Orlando as a boy had been irresistible. Some extra years under his belt had only increased his appeal. She tried not to think about that. "Listen, buster, you have a *lot* of explaining to do. Start talking."

"*Me* start? A discussion is a two-way street, you know. Why should I be the one to do all the talking?"

"Because you're so good at it. And you're the one who wanted to have this discussion in the first place."

A swath of light from the rising moon slanted through a break in the trees, illuminating them both in sharp silver splendor—all but his face, still hidden in the dark of his hood. His voice whispered out of shadows, smoky soft. "No, you're the one who chose talking. *I'm* the one who wants to make love." He reached for her hand.

She jerked it away. "You never give up, do you?"

"Not easily."

Touché. Torn between a laugh and a groan, she grabbed for his hood. "Take that damn thing off, will you? I am *really* sick of it. Do you have any idea how annoying it is never being able to see you in there?" With both hands, she yanked it back. Her breath snagged as he caught her wrists, locking her arms around his neck, holding her off balanced, leaning into him.

"And do you have any idea how beautiful you look in the moonlight?"

"Don't change the subject." Grunting, she tried to heave backward, lost her balance completely, and tipped over to land sideways across his thighs.

His arms snaked around her waist, pulling her up and full onto his lap, fastening her in place. "That's better. Now I can talk, I think."

Good, because she couldn't. In a breathless daze she stared at him, suddenly trapped in a time-warp more mysterious than the one that sent her here, seeing the boy's face beneath the man's, his features older, harder, a bit of an edge to them, but unmistakable even under the shadow of his day-old beard. Same nose, same mouth, same eyes...

Lost in those eyes, she raised a hand to trace her fingers over his face from brow to cheek to chin. He gave a low moan at her touch. The solid warmth of his hand closed over hers. Carefully, he brought it to his lips and kissed her fingertips, each one individually. Liquid tremors flowed down her arm, pooling in heat deep within her. Her voice rasped out in a hoarse whisper.

"I should have recognized you...but I saw Stacey that first night at the house. She must have sneaked in. Then I saw her again at the faire today... I thought she was you."

“Don’t feel bad, I made the same mistake. In reverse, when I first saw my boy self in the woods. God, what a weird experience. For a second, I thought it was Stacey.”

That must have been bizarre, all right, meeting oneself. A strained laugh escaped her. “Well, I always did think you were almost too pretty to be a boy.”

He laughed with her, an equally strained sound. “Mutch was watching the road that day and saw the start of the attack. He ran off to gather as many of the band as he could. That’s how we operate. Most of the wood-devils are from the manor, my own tenants. The rest are from nearby villages. There are close to a hundred total, but rarely more than twenty or so in the forest at any one time. They take it in turns. We don’t need large numbers to do our job. A little *intimidation* goes a long way.”

Marian didn’t doubt it. From what she’d seen, his devils could scare seasoned warriors straight out of their mail. She flashed him a wry look. “Why do I have the impression those ridiculous get-ups were all your idea?”

“Because you know me so well?”

A grin lit his face—unforgettable, incorrigible—slicing through her like a blade. She should have recognized that grin before now, too. Stifling a groan she let her head sink down to rest on his shoulder.

Roland (or Robin... Orlando... whoever the heck he was) pulled her closer, burying one hand in her hair at the nape of her neck, stroking the other in slow sizzling circles over her back. “*You* gave me the idea for the wood-devils. I remembered you warning me how people of this era might think we were... How did you put it? Superstitious? You were right. Those ‘ridiculous get-ups’ have been better protection than armor.”

“Oh sure, blame it on me.” She fisted a hand against his chest and tried to push away, but not with much conviction. The erotic back-massage continued. “Will you stop that? It’s very distracting.”

“It is? Good. That means it’s working.”

Her fist thumped his breastbone. “I said, *stop it*.”

With a sigh, he stopped, but held her firm when she twisted and turned in an effort to slide off his thighs. “You didn’t used to be so bitchy.”

“And you didn’t used to be so *big*. I need time to adjust, damn it.” She tilted back her head to gaze at him. “A few days ago you could have sat on *my* lap.”

“A few days for you, almost two decades for me.” His eyes bore down into hers, glittering like black magic in the moonlight. “There were two time-jumps.”

Her throat constricted, making her voice tight. “I know. I already guessed that.” *How else to explain what happened?* “The first one sent us here together, and the second—”

“Knocked me back eighteen years earlier. Without you.” He leaned into the tree and pulled his knees up, trapping her more snugly in his embrace. “Eighteen long, lonely years. I’ve been here waiting for you all this time.”

“No, you haven’t. You’d have had no way of determining you’d been sent back further. If it were the other way around, I could have figured it out based on who was king at the time, but I doubt a twelve-year-old ghetto kid could have done that.”

“Ah, but I was a *well read* ghetto kid.”

“Yeah, courtesy of Mr. Mueller. But not that well read. I know what books you shoplifted, remember, and they weren’t histories of England.” She rested her head on his shoulder again, while the moon streamed down silver and the whispering of the woods surrounded them both in an unearthly calm.

His chuckle vibrated against her, irony in the sound. "Okay, if you're going to nit-pick, no, I didn't realize what had happened at first. It took me years to puzzle it out. All I knew in the beginning was one second we were on the road and... *ahem*... Robin Hood had just stepped out of the trees behind you. The next, there were others around me... A man kneeling over a body at my feet... I thought he must have come out of the trees with Robin Hood, but Robin was no longer there. Neither were you." For a moment the man sounded younger than the boy. "I thought somehow you'd been sent forward to our own time...and I'd been left behind." He clutched her to him, like he was afraid she might suddenly disappear again.

Geeze, now she felt like crap. She'd been so busy battling her own confusion, she'd hardly stopped to consider his. "I'm sorry. I'm really sorry you had to deal with so much so young." *So alone*. She'd wanted to protect the boy, and when he'd needed her, she'd been nowhere in sight. The thought cut her to the quick. "I should have been there to help."

"If you had, we couldn't be here as we are now."

"Don't go esoteric on me. I'm weirded-out enough as it is."

"But it's the truth. I needed to grow up for you."

Yeah, and look how he'd grown. Lord, what a stretch. It went far beyond switching centuries. Fancy a smart-ass street kid from North Philly turning into a well bred, well schooled powerhouse of an aristocrat. And Robin Hood on top of it. It made her dizzy just skirting the surface of the idea.

She straightened in his lap and leaned away just enough to meet him eye to eye. "You're an amazing man, you know that? I can't even imagine what you must have gone through to get to where you are now."

"It's been rough." He gazed back, his eyes dark limpid pools of innocence, pure puppy-dog eyes. "But you could kiss me and make it all better."

Sympathy soured. "Don't press your luck. I'm not *that* sorry."

"Just a thought. You can't blame a guy for trying."

"Too late. I already have."

His chest rose and fell with a dramatic sigh. "I was right, you have gotten bitchy."

"And you're acting more juvenile than you did at twelve. Are you *ever* going to tell me what happened? I thought we were supposed to be having a discussion."

"What's wrong with a little kissing first? We have the rest of our lives together to discuss things."

"The rest of your life is likely to be very short if you *don't* tell me."

"I know, instead of you kissing me, how about I kiss you? Either way would work."

"You are *really* asking for it."

He grinned. "I certainly am."

Arrghh... Flailing arms and legs she heaved off him. He hung on as she went and they landed breathless in a tangle of limbs, her on her back, him hovering above, propped up on an elbow, pinning her flat with the weight of his lower body and his stare—hot and heavy, pleading, almost desperate.

Electric warmth crackled through her at the contact, bringing a prickle of panic with it. Gasping, she struggled to wriggle free, but the movement ground her pelvis into his, which only made things worse. Like his body had a mind of its own below the belt, something very male suddenly grew very large, a thick hard club pressing into her belly. His gaze hardened with it, deepening, darkening, the plea

becoming demand.

Marian's body responded with a convulsive quiver and a rush of damp heat between her thighs. Her breath snagged in her throat and she went rigid beneath him, her nerves stretched taut between desire and fear. He looked...determined, looked like he meant business. She was screwed. Or about to be.

Dark eyes drilled into her. A firm hand stroked up her side and over her breasts. A hand that knew exactly what it was doing. Her nipples, traitorous things, tightened against the fabric of her gown. He smiled at the reaction. There was no need to be so smug about it, blast him. A new quiver shook her as his thumb traced lazy circles around first one hard peak, then the other. Twigs snapped as he slid lower, bending his head, his mouth fastening on to one of the spots his thumb had teased.

Sultry sizzle. She felt the heat of his tongue, the tiny nip of his teeth even through two layers of fabric. The sensation shot straight into her groin, making her dig fingers into his hair. Her mind said she was trying to pull him off her, but somehow her hands clutched him closer. Bad hands.

A low growl vibrated against her nipple and suddenly he pushed back, glaring down, his look searing her. "This isn't working. I don't want to taste silk, damn it. I want flesh!"

Before she could gather wits enough to gasp, he hauled both of them to their feet. Her gasp came a second later when a sharp tug broke the clasp of her belt.

What the—

"Hey, wait a minute. What do you think you're doing?" Eyes wide, she slapped his hands when he gripped her skirt and began lifting. "Stop that!"

He didn't. *Unbelievable.*

"Roland! You're supposed to stop if I tell you."

"Sorry, sweetheart, this isn't Roland you're dealing with. It's Robin Hood. Robin *takes* what he wants."

Oh God...

With one swift movement he hoisted gown and undershift together up and over her head. They fell with a soft swish on the ground, leaving her with nothing but stockings and slippers. A few moves more and they were gone, too.

His jaw dropped as he stepped back and stared, his eyes drinking in every drop of her. His voice whispered out husky and hoarse. "Holy friggin' hell...you're gorgeous."

Without another pause he tore at his own clothes, adding them to the pile at her feet. Paralyzed, she watched in naked shock—really naked—as he stripped to the skin, then stood there like bare bronze before her, a snarl on his lips, muscles rippling in the moonlight, and his erection thrust out like a battering ram. A big battering ram, rock solid and pulsing.

Genuine fear stabbed her. Choking, she spun about to flee.

Hot hands grabbed her shoulders, pulling her up short. A throaty growl rumbled behind her. *Ack.* This wasn't Robin. It was a werewolf. He pushed her forward, holding her at arm's length, giving his gaze room to roam.

"Damn," he said, awed wonder in the curse. "The rear view is as good as the front." His grip shifted to her hips, his hands rubbing, squeezing. "I'd like to drench you in chocolate syrup and lick you clean from top to toe."

She squealed as he sank to a crouch and planted a hungry open-mouthed kiss on her bottom's left cheek. He followed it with a matching one on the right, running his tongue up to the dimple at the base of her spine. Liquid heat coursed through her, shaking her legs.

"Too bad chocolate hasn't been invented yet," he murmured against her, seemingly to himself. "Honey might be an interesting alternative. We've plenty of hives on the manor."

Her knees buckled, collapsing her onto her back in the nest of clothes on the ground. With a guttural groan, he collapsed on top of her, his front to her side, holding her down with one leg over hers. His erection ground into her hip; his breathing quickened with her own. Panic and desire rose together, pulling her back and forth in a tug of war. She struggled against both.

"Honey is nice, but I've really missed chocolate. And potato chips and pizza...hoagies, cheese steaks...especially cheese steaks..." The list came out between pants. He braced up on his right elbow to gaze down. "But I've missed you far more. I've loved you since the first day I saw you in the bookstore."

She stared up, heart hammering against her ribs. "That's ridiculous. You were just a kid."

"Old enough to know a fabulous chick when I saw one. I wanted to marry you even then. I was just waiting till I was taller than you to pop the question."

"Cripes, I was thirteen years older than you."

"I was hoping you liked younger men." He wrapped his leg more securely over hers as his left hand touched and teased, exploring every inch of her from neck to navel.

She quivered like a bowstring under his fingers. "That's not funny."

"Do you see me laughing?" Looking darn serious about it, he lowered his head and pulled one nipple, then the other into his mouth, tonguing her, sucking her, nearly giving her a stroke.

Her back arched spastically. "S-stop it."

He stopped just long enough to glance at her. "Stop what? This?" He suckled her right breast. "Or this?" He switched to the left.

Hot sparks tingled through her, curling her toes. She pushed at his shoulders, almost whimpering. "That's not funny either. Just *stop*, damn it. Let me up. Now! *You're* the one who said you'd stop if I asked. You *said* I could trust you." She punctuated the speech by pounding fists on his back, but not very hard.

"Ow." He lifted up on his elbow again, giving her the puppy-dog eyes, looking wounded.

She resisted the urge to sock him for real. "I didn't hurt you."

"I know." His look turned serious, stern, a little frightening in its intent. Okay, from her perspective, a lot frightening. With arm and leg he pinned her firmer to the ground when she redoubled the effort to squirm free. His face lowered until his nose nearly touched hers. "And you should know that *I'm* not going to hurt you."

"I can't help it." Suddenly she saw him through a blur of tears. "I'm scared." *And embarrassed.* "I panic when I'm held down. I can't help it," she repeated, feeling like a wuss.

"Oh, sweetheart..." The words came out on a soft moan. "I know that, too. And I understand why. But I'm not trying to scare you. I'm holding you *because* you're scared. I can't let you go running off into the woods naked." Like the flutter of moth wings, he feathered tiny kisses across her cheeks, capturing tears one by one with each touch of his lips.

Panic receded, leaving a residue of grumpiness behind.

"It's your fault I'm naked." She pushed against him, still trying to wriggle loose, but the pushes were getting weaker. He was winning and he knew it. She knew it. The realization made her grumpier. "You could let me up to get dressed."

"I could. But I'll not. Care to know why?"

"Because you get off on being a pain in the ass?"

"No. 'Tis you I get off on." He kissed her nose.

She batted at him like he was a mosquito. "The problem is you *won't* get off me."

"I won't because you don't really want me to."

That he was probably right didn't make the statement any easier to swallow. "Awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Maybe. But I'm more sure of you." His gaze held hers as his hand swept down her side and over her belly to the juncture of her thighs, cupping her, massaging...his fingers probing...

Her eyes widened as he found his target and two fingers slid inside. His thumb found a spot a little above, rubbing up and down while the fingers moved in and out. Talk about manual dexterity. Her muscles spasmed. Her mouth dropped open. Air suddenly became a scarce commodity.

Roland seemed pleased to have proved his point. He withdrew his hand and stared at her panting for breath.

"You're wet," he whispered. "Very wet. Very hot." He put his fingers in his mouth and sucked them clean. "And very, very delicious."

Gulp. Also very scared again, pulse pounding with anxiety and anticipation combined, trembling from the impact of emotional and physical response. And he was only beginning. She'd never survive.

Fresh panic flooded her as he shifted his body full onto hers—chest to chest, belly to belly, skin scorching skin—his thick shaft sandwiched hard between them, loaded, cocked and ready to fire. She clamped her knees together against the threatened invasion. No use. He felt the movement and dug both his knees between hers, pressing outward, spreading her legs, opening her wide. *Oh God.*

She squeezed her eyes shut, bit her lip, braced herself.

"Sweetheart, you look terrified. Relax." His mouth landed gently at the corner of hers. He followed the kiss with a matching one at the other corner, then one on each eyelid, the bridge of her nose, her chin... Butterfly kisses, soft and sweet. A breathy moan escaped her.

"Shh, it's all right. You'll be all right." He kissed his way over her jaw line and down her neck, nibbling and nuzzling. Whispering, soothing... "I know you're frightened. I understand. It's okay to be afraid of the act. Just don't be afraid of me. I'll never do anything to hurt you." His lips teased the hollow of her throat. "You *can* trust me. You can trust that I know exactly how to make you feel good."

Marian melted beneath him as he kissed a trail from the base of her throat to between her breasts. Warm shivers shook her. She did love him, didn't she? She'd lost sight of that while panic ruled. She remembered it now full-force. She opened her mouth to tell him.

"Uhhh—" was all that came out. Her eyes popped open. Her heart stopped. Good God almighty, *what* was he doing?

A hot tongue licked straight down her stomach, over her navel and lower abdomen, and plunged into a place that had never felt a tongue before. The men in her past experiences only wanted to take pleasure, not give it. Her legs slammed against his ears in a spastic reflex, squeezing him like a vise.

With a small grunt, he inserted hands between her thighs and pried her apart. "Excuse me, I need a little room to work."

Giving her no choice in the matter, he gripped her behind the knees, bending them, lifting... In two smooth moves he hooked her right leg over his left shoulder,

and her left leg over his right. His hands slid under her hips, raising her to his mouth.

“Wait!” She strained her head up to stare. Did he realize how vulnerable this made her feel? Not to mention silly. Who invented these ridiculous positions anyway? She clutched the fabric pile beneath her. “N-no one’s ever done this to me before.”

“You’ll like it, I promise. Just lie back and relax.”

Easy for him to say. “W-what if I don’t like it?”

“I’ve not had any complaints yet.” He glanced up to give her a wink and a grin.

The grin nearly undid her. Her head dropped back with a thud. His tongue flicked out, giving her a sample of what was to come. *Oooh...* She did like it. But she was suddenly damned if she’d admit it.

No complaints? Well, she had one. Why did he have to remind her of his previous...um, successes?

“I suppose Tabitha loves it.” Suddenly she hated Tabitha.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never asked her.”

“You have to ask?” Couldn’t he just tell by the woman’s reaction?

He let out a small sigh, his breath hissing against her like steam, a remarkably titillating sensation. She began to regret she’d started this conversation.

“Sweetheart...” He turned his head to kiss the inside of her right thigh. “Tabby really *is* just a friend.” He kissed the left. “She appreciates what the wood-devils do and she’s been kind enough to let me use her as an alibi. Her cottage is my *phone booth*.”

Say what? It took a second for understanding to dawn. A second in which he licked her from stem to stern, his tongue probing deep.

Lord have mercy! She moaned and clutched at the fabric again. Her blood turned to molten lava. Her words came out in gasps.

“You...you mean like in Superman? The way Clark Kent used to d-duck into a phone booth to change?” The Earl of Hunterdon went into Tabitha’s cottage at night and Robin Hood came out. Clever.

“Mmm...” He hummed the sound into her flesh. “Yes. Will you shut up now? I’m rather busy at the moment—in case you’d not noticed.”

“I noticed,” she rasped out. Then speech deserted her as he focused his attention on one small spot, his tongue teasing before his mouth closed down, sucking her over the edge into orgasm—hot, wet, electric—an inner earthquake, rocking her to the core. Before the last shock wave had passed, he slipped out from under her legs and moved up her body—slid straight into her with one smooth thrust. Her hips bucked against him, driving him in deeper. Her legs wrapped around his waist, her arms locked around his neck. All reflex actions. She scarcely realized what had happened, how it happened, till he was pressed to the hilt inside her.

Fresh waves crashed over her at the surprise impact of the entry and she toppled over the edge again, the first climax rolling right into a second. Her inner muscles squeezed him in a series of spasms. She buried her face in his neck, hearing him groan deep in his throat, feeling him clench his teeth to control his response. He held motionless within her while the waves receded, then started rocking his hips. Partial thrusts, a few inches out, a few inches in. Steady, slow...deathly sensual.

“That was a sneaky trick,” she breathed into his skin, each word a soft pant.

The rocking increased tempo, the penetration deepened. His heart pounded against hers, his own breathing quickening pace with his thrusts. “Just an old battle

maneuver. Penetrate the fortress while the defenses are down.”

“I’m not sure I like being referred to as a fortress.”

“Blame Sigurd. He’s the one who taught me strategy. He also told me that what works in war oft works with women.”

“*Sigurd?*” She let go of his neck to flatten hands on his chest, pushing him back enough to look at him.

The rocking paused on an inward thrust, his erection filling her. Like hot coals, his eyes gleamed down. “Don’t judge him by how he is now. Sigurd’s gone senile, I’m afraid. He’s lost his edge. But he was once as sharp as they come, a master swordsman, horseman, *and* a champion archer.” A small grin curved his lips. “I’ve learned a lot from Sigurd.”

“Obviously.” Wow, this was something she’d never expected. Then again... “I, um, guess no one becomes steward of a big estate without having some serious abilities, huh?” She wished she’d considered that before.

“Right. He’s also devoted to the Hunterdons and he wanted to stay steward—which is how I became earl.”

“How *did* you become earl?”

“Marian—” With a grunt and a growl, he pulled out of her to slam back in, making her gasp. “’Tis a long story and you’re not going to hear it now. We’re doing something *else* right now, in case you hadn’t—”

“I noticed, I noticed!” She clutched his shoulders as he drove into her twice more. Like she needed the reminder, ha-ha. Raw heat filled her with each thrust, but her mind kept moving, questioning, if only to distract herself from the heat. This experience *was* rather disconcerting for her. He ought to realize that, darn it.

She pushed at his chest again. “You could at least explain why you didn’t tell me any of this before. I can talk and fuck at the same time.”

“Well, I can’t.” His head lowered till his brow rested on hers, his breath warm on her face, his weight pressing her into the ground. “Besides which, I think ‘fuck’ is rather a coarse word for this. Have you ever stopped to think that when a person says ‘fuck you’ they don’t mean anything kindly? You never hear anyone say ‘love you’ with the same intent. I don’t know about you, sweetheart, but I’m not fucking. I’m *making love* to the woman I adore.”

Making love to her mind as well as her body. He *was* sneaky, wasn’t he? She stopped pushing as he stroked one hand up her side to cradle the back of her head. The rocking started again with rhythmic half-thrusts, almost too controlled, obviously calculated to make her want more. Her eyes drifted shut as his mouth drifted down, whispering.

“But just for the record, I *did* try to tell you our first night. Remember?”

Her eyes snapped open. Her breath hitched. Yes, she remembered. She hadn’t initially, but it had all come back to her when she’d discovered the truth about him. It came back now even stronger, the whole experience crowding into her head in vivid erotic detail. And the memory of that past lovemaking merged with the current, cranking up the heat. He must have guessed that would happen. *Very sneaky*.

She squirmed against him. “You can’t count that. I was dizzy and disoriented. I thought I was dreaming.”

“So did I after you sat on me. Why do you think I rushed our marriage? No way was I letting you get away from me after that. I tried to tell you after the wedding though—in the bedchamber—but you were in no mood to listen then either.”

“I’m listening now.”

"I know. And your timing sucks." His lips landed on hers.

She twisted her face to the side. "You've had plenty of chances to tell me since then."

All other movement stopped as the hand on her head tightened, forcing her forward again. Not a rough move, just very definite. His chest rubbed hers, rising and falling with heavy breathing.

"Marian, I *couldn't*, not after seeing you at Gisbourne's. The wood-devils were already there when you and Cymrica arrived. I made it there just a little later. We were watching from the top of the wall. I nearly fell off when you pretended to be Elaine. How could I tell you anything after *that* performance?"

Crap. He'd been afraid she wouldn't be able to keep his secret. "You thought I might give you away, didn't you?"

"Sweetheart, you have many wonderful qualities, but guile is not one of them."

She knew that, darn it. "You don't have to rub it in."

"No, I'm rubbing *this* in." He pulled out to enter her again, sliding in smooth as silk, starting a new series of teasing half-thrusts.

A surge of warmth warred with a sudden chill. The moon dipped past the break in the overhead branches, casting their little nest into darkness, but not as dark as her thoughts. This was why he'd become sheriff. He couldn't play wood-devils with her here, and he figured the only sure way to end the game would be to "kill" Robin in public. The motive for it wasn't jealousy, but it boiled down to the same thing. It was still dangerous. Still all her fault.

She grabbed his shoulders. "You're not really going through with things tomorrow, are you? What if it backfires and you get killed for real?" Her fingers bit into his flesh.

His probed the back of her head.

For crying out loud. She didn't want a scalp massage. She wanted answers. "Stop that. I asked you a question." She grappled with his hand.

"I heard you." He kept on rooting. "I'm looking for the switch to turn off your brain. You worry too much."

Inner flames flared up as his pelvis ground into hers. The "switch" was lower down actually, and he'd already found it, but she wasn't about to point that out. She gripped him tighter. "Roland, this is no joke. I'm worried about *you*."

"*Roland?*" He shoved hard into her and stopped—suddenly—raising up on his hands to stare down, his breath ragged, his expression lost in the shadows. "'Tis *Robin* you're worried about."

She winced at the edge in his tone. Yes, he would think that, wouldn't he? A little schizoid of him maybe, but she understood what he meant. He just wanted her to love him for himself. Boy, did she have news for him, whoever he was. A wave of tenderness struck, washing away the last of her resistance. With both hands she pulled him down full on top of her, arms wrapping around his neck. "Robin's a great guy, but you ought to know it was Roland I fell in love with."

His breath sucked in sharply. "You did?"

"Don't sound so surprised. Roland's a great guy, too."

Oh, no you don't. Her arms anchored him in place when he tried to pull back for another stare. Like he thought he'd see something in the dark her voice and body couldn't tell him? Silly man. Far better to focus on the feel of each other than try to pierce the shadows. She'd had enough of shadows.

"I'll admit I'm glad I *don't* have to choose between the two of you, but the fact is I'd already chosen," she whispered into his ear, nibbling his lobe between

words.

A low moan rolled out. "You did?"

He was repeating himself, but she doubted he noticed that. A shudder racked through him as she rubbed her legs over his buttocks and the backs of his thighs before sliding them up to refasten around his waist. "Yes, I did. Finding out the truth hasn't changed anything for me. I'd have stayed with you regardless."

"Really?" All the tension in him released with the word. All but the tension in the part of him buried between her legs. That part hardened and swelled to new proportions, demanding instant attention.

She raised her hips, pulling him as deep into her as he'd go. "Really. I chose Roland."

"Robin will be so disappointed," he murmured into her neck.

She felt the grin on his lips. "Smart-ass."

"I love you, too."

He kissed her neck, punctuating it with a nip, licking and sucking. Adding vampire to his repertoire of outlaw and earl? *God, he felt good.* A rhythmic rocking began, their bodies moving together in unspoken agreement, in and out...giving, receiving. A hot harmony of rising blood pressure and naked flesh. His breath snagged. So did hers, but she forced out speech with the pants and gasps. Feeling love build physically made worry all the worse.

"Robin will be *dead*, and Roland with him if you don't call off that godawful trap tomorrow."

"Uhhh..." His erection ground in deep with the groan. "God have mercy... Do we *have* to argue? Now?"

"Yes! This is important."

"So is this." Gritting his teeth he speeded the tempo, sliding in and out harder, faster.

She met him thrust for thrust, straining to hang on to her wits, her voice—hanging on to him through the bumps and grinds, giving back as good as she got. A war of wills with passion their only weapon.

"Roland, please..." She panted out the plea. "I don't want to argue. I just don't want to lose you!" How the hell did he think he was going to pull this off? *Faking his death?* Cripes. "If you won't think about me or yourself, think of the Hunterdons. You have a daughter, for godssake. What will happen to Stacey and the rest of them if something goes wrong?"

That got him. He growled and dug his arms under her, rolling onto his back, reversing their positions, barely giving her time to unlock her legs from his waist and hook them behind his knees instead. Breathless, she flattened against him, feeling his heart hammering into hers. His hands grabbed her ass, squeezing and kneading before his fingers traced up her spine and raked through her hair. He finished the maneuver by cupping her face, holding her nose to nose with him. His breath whispered out soft and warm on her lips with his words.

"Sweetheart, I'll be all right, I promise. Everything has been carefully arranged. Nothing will go wrong."

No. He couldn't be sure of that. She almost sobbed, anxiety and sexual tension pulling her apart. "Something can always go wrong. Haven't you ever heard of Murphy's Law?"

"As a matter of fact, I have, but not since I was a boy. Murphy—if he is a real person—can't have been born yet, so I think we're safe in ignoring him for now."

She glared through the dark. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

“No, ’twas meant to zip your lips, my lady.”

A weird thrill shot through her at the sound of him mixing medieval and modern speech. Weird but sexy. And intensely intimate. No one else could understand either of them the way they understood each other. No one ever would. It went beyond the joinings of love. They were bound together by origins and experiences no other shared. By the time-jump itself.

And if she’d managed to keep *that* under wraps, she could bloody well be trusted with his Robin Hood secret, couldn’t she? He didn’t *have* to kill himself, damn it to hell.

“Roland—”

His mouth covered hers. *Mmmph*. Awfully difficult to talk with an extra tongue exploring one’s oral cavity. He kept his lips glued to hers as he rolled them over, pinning her beneath him once more.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before,” he mumbled against her. “Such a simple scientific solution. Two objects can’t occupy the same space at the same time. Nor have I ever known a woman who can talk and kiss at the same time—however adept she may be at doing *other* things while talking.”

There he went again, referencing past exploits.

“Known a lot of women, have you?” she strained out.

“Of course not. I’m a virgin. Can’t you tell?”

Hardee har har. “And I’m Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise.”

“Nice to meet you, Captain. Prepare to be boarded. Beam me up, Scotty.”

“You’re already *up*.”

“Thank you for noticing.” His *up* part drove in as his mouth pressed down, claiming her fore and aft with lips and hips, ending any more argument, moving the action into overdrive and melting her toenails. Loving her blind, deaf, and dumb.

He gave her no choice but to hang on for the ride, nothing to do but open herself and soak him up like a sponge. The taste of him on her tongue, salty and sweet. The luscious smell of him in her nostrils mingling with the musky scent of sex. A titillating contrast of textures, soft silk and coarse wool beneath her, smooth skin and hard body above—hot and heavy on her and in her—building a volcano between them, raising the heat with every thrust, increasing the pressure till they blew the top off each other and erupted in simultaneous orgasms, their cries ringing up into the trees and scaring the night birds. Together they set Sherwood ablaze.

Somewhere in the midst of it all Marian realized she’d turned a big corner. The old fear, the panicked response to certain stimuli was gone. The memories that had spawned the panic were still there, still painful, but she could manage them now. She had new memories to override the old, a new sense of self telling her what Roland had told her earlier, that she was stronger and braver than she knew. She’d thought herself weak, a coward because she scared easily. Now she understood courage had nothing to do with not being afraid. Courage was moving forward in spite of the fear, not giving into panic, not letting it control you. Courage was all about keeping your hands on your own reins.

A good thing to keep in mind while facing the worst fear of her life, fear that she’d never be able to get enough of the beautiful man on top of her, that this would be her last night with him unless she could stop what he planned for the morrow. Unthinkable. She clung to him as the smoke cleared, fighting for breath enough to renew the argument.

Like he read her thoughts, he recovered first and started the lovemaking all over again before she could strangle out a word. He had his own agenda for the

night and debate wasn't on the list.

"We'll call that 'one,'" he whispered against her lips while his body worked its magic on hers. "But I'd better warn you that *seven* has always been my lucky number."

She'd have wept if she hadn't suddenly remembered that seven was her lucky number, too. *Help me, Lord.* Maybe she'd get a chance to talk some sense into him between five and six. He ought to be slowing down a bit by then...

Chapter 16

He did slow down eventually, but by that time so had she. Little more talk was ever accomplished. Their lips had other business. Locked together like two halves of the same whole, they fell into exhausted, sated slumber just before the feathery gray of pre-dawn painted the sky.

Marian awoke back at the manor to blaring sunlight and the extremely annoying awareness he'd moved her while she slept. Again. Boy, this was getting old. She didn't need to worry about sleepwalking anymore, did she? Not with a husband who did the job for her. She punched the pillow in the great bed where she lay alone. Damn, she wanted to kill him. No, scratch that. He was already planning something along those lines himself. Double damn. She wanted to scream, that's what she wanted.

She almost did when the door opened and Solemnia tripped gaily into the chamber. Well, not literally. She sort of bounced in, carrying a breakfast tray in one hand and a ewer of warm water for washing in the other. A gilt basin for pouring the water into she'd balanced upside down over her head like an armored version of a Chinese coolie hat. Wacky woman.

Wouldst Lady Marian care to be bathed before eating or after, she desired to know.

Lady Marian preferred a round on the rack to both options. How strange. The lady truly wished to bathe herself whenever the act occurred. Solemnia found that hilarious, but took it like a sport. She was a Hunterdon, after all, used to eccentric behavior. Criminally cheery, she deposited the tray on the table by the bed, and the ewer and basin on a stand in the corner, whilst delivering the news that Lord Roland had long since ridden out to Nottingham Town. The rest of the family made ready to depart now, but her lord had left orders his lady was to spend a quiet day in her chambers, recouping. She'd had a most busy night apparently. Giggle, giggle.

Stay home? While Roland was off getting himself into God only knew what kind of trouble? Not bloody likely.

Marian waited till both inner and outer doors shut behind Solemnia, then dragged upright in bed and glared at the contents of the tray, wishing vainly for but one item. Not there, of course. Curse Columbus for not being born yet. A groggy fog filled her head and every muscle ached from the long night's loving. A delicious ache to be sure, but decidedly inconvenient when one's husband was facing death.

She had to do something, damn it, and she could scarcely move, let alone think. Having to function without caffeine seemed cruel and unusual punishment. The bed felt so comfortable. The noise filtering up through the window—horses snorting and people calling back and forth as they mounted up—sounded so far away. If only she could sink down under the covers and go back to sleep, just for a few hundred years, until coffee was discovered. If only she could trust his assurances, believe his promise that he'd be all right.

But she had a sickening sensation he was wrong.

She'd been wrong, she suddenly remembered. Coffee didn't originate in South America. That was cocoa. Coffee was discovered about the third century A.D. in Abyssinia and Arabia. An accessible part of the world, thank heaven. She might possibly be able to lay her hands on some in this lifetime. That thought gave her the strength to stumble to her feet and manage a hasty bath, splashing water all over herself like a bird. Damp and shivering, she pulled the forest-green gown over her

head. Her Maid Marian gown. Rather simple attire for an earl's lady facing public display, but she needed to feel more like the maid than the lady today if she was going to rescue Robin Hood from the sheriff's trap. Er...his own trap.

She paused in the middle of finger-combing her hair. Gad, this whole thing was psychotic. And to make matters worse, she couldn't remember a single legend where Maid Marian rescued Robin from anything. Usually it was the other way around. Which meant what? That her plan wasn't supposed to happen? That she was destined to failure before she even began?

Hell, she had no plan, so how could she guess whether or not it would work? She was darned if she'd sit here doing nothing, that was all she knew.

Someone had refastened the silver mirror onto its table. She chanced a glance in it and saw the finger-combing hadn't accomplished much. Too bad. There was no time for anything more. Maybe she could call it the wind-blown look and start a new fashion trend for noblewomen everywhere. Without another pause she raced out the door, through the outer chamber, down the stairs, across the courtyard, and straight down the length of the great hall, making it to the front door just in time to see the Hunterdon party at the end of the long driveway and about to turn onto the forest road. Oh no—

“Waaaaaaitt!”

Ow, that hurt. Marian stood swaying from the noise. She never dreamed she could scream so loud. Presumably no one else had either. The whole company came to a sharp halt, horses rearing and bumping each other, riders staring this way and that as though expecting some sort of attack. Finally, someone noticed her in front of the huge house, pressing hands against a head ringing with her own shout.

The lead rider raised an arm and kneed his mount to the side, directing the others around him and onto the road. As the rest trotted off toward Nottingham, he cantered back down the drive. A commanding figure in a surcoat of the Hunterdon green and gold, plumes waving from the top of his polished helm, the sleeves of his mail shirt shining silver in the morning sun.

Who was that? Marian squinted as he drew near, but didn't recognize him till he reined to a stop and dismounted, pulling off his helmet and sweeping a low bow before her all in one smooth cavalier move. Even after she recognized him, she hardly believed it.

Sir Sigurd standing straight and steely-eyed in full ceremonial armor, showing her something of the knight he'd once been and could still play when push came to shove.

Her mouth opened in shock. He enjoyed that. A sly grin split his gray beard as he waited for her to speak.

“Aye, m'lady?”

Marian hesitated, suddenly wondering. Here was the man who'd turned a street kid into an earl. A sharp trick, and from what she saw now, he'd lost none of his edge. Roland was wrong about that. A person suffering genuine senility might have odd moments of clarity, but it wasn't something they could turn off and on at will, was it? Which meant Sigurd's doddering-old-fool-by-the-fire act was likely as big a put-on as Roland playing the prim, proper aristocrat. Roland's act had purpose though. It was a smokescreen that helped guard Robin Hood. What was Sigurd's excuse?

There was something wrong with this picture, and the fact that Sigurd had chosen today of all days to drop his act made the whole thing worse. He must know about his sheriff-earl's trap, but did he know the real reason behind it? Hell, he was the one who'd taught Roland archery. He'd have to at least suspect what his star

student had been up to. The bigger question was how he felt about it. Would a man famous for his loyalty to the Hunterdons think kindly of an activity that could ruin his household if the truth became public?

She pressed fingers to her temples, feeling a headache beginning to build. Sigurd's grin narrowed into an uncompromising line.

"M'lady, I've small desire to hasten you, but I'll be riding hard as 'tis to reach Nottingham afore the competition starts. If you've a need of me, you'd best state it swiftly."

"She wants to ride there with you, I'll warrant. 'Tis what I'd want. I want it now, in fact," a rebellious voice called from an upstairs window.

Before anyone could react, a small figure, bright as the day in a poppy-red gown with sunshine-yellow ribbons, careened out the great front door and skidded to a breathless stop beside Marian. Lady Stacey moved fast. Well, her father always had. The girl must have escaped from her morning toilette. Half her hair hung in a neat braid over her left shoulder while the right half stood out rivaling Marian's wind-blown look.

"They left me behind, too," she said indignantly. "I'm being punished for running away from school. What did you do?"

Marian couldn't answer. That Roland hadn't wanted either of them in Nottingham today didn't bode well. He was trying to protect them, she knew it. He wasn't as sure of his safety as he'd claimed and he wanted his wife and daughter clear of the scene. Just in case.

Her heart twisted as the flushed young face grinned up at her. Pure imp. Orlando's grin. For a brief instant she was stuck in a time-warp again, only this one took her to the future. She saw herself and Roland surrounded by children, Stacey and others—all sizes, all theirs—a whole tribe of beautiful boys and girls laughing and clamoring around them. The vision filled her with sweetness and tore her apart in a single breath. Her hand flattened on her belly in hope even as fear froze her blood. What if he'd already planted a child in her?

And he was off now trying to make her a widow on top of it? Screw that. Quickly, she fronted Sigurd. His eyes met hers, then shifted to her middle, letting her know he'd caught her gesture before. And read her thoughts? An odd grin played about his lips, something creepy in the expression. Or was that just her own anxiety making her see sinister intent in everything?

She shook off a sudden apprehension. "Stacey guessed right. I called you back because I need transport to Nottingham." She *was* going, even if she had to ride there behind the currently doubtful Sir Sigurd.

"I wish to go, too," Stacey said. "Please? If I can just see the archery today, I'll stay in the house all the rest of the week doing penance, I promise." She smiled at Sigurd and batted her eyes.

His brows pulled together in a frown, looking like a bushy gray caterpillar marching across his forehead. "You'll do penance all week in any case, my little bird. And you'll return to your chambers and begin it posthaste, or I'll clip your wings so short you'll ne'er fly again."

"W-what?" Stacey's face turned red as her gown. Her gaze flashed to Marian who guessed from the girl's shock Sigurd had never spoken so harshly to her before.

She hated having to back the man even in part, but she didn't want Stacey near Nottingham today either. She had enough to worry about as it was.

"Sweetie, I know it's rough, but you have to stay here. It's for your own good. Trust me on that." She reached out and ruffled the dark curls, hoping to lessen

the sting of her words.

Stacey glared mutinously. "Adults always say that when they want you not to have fun."

"I doubt it'll be very fun," Marian told her. God knew she wasn't looking forward to the event. "Be thankful you have people who care enough to want what's good for you. Not all children are so lucky." She knew.

"Father tells me the same bloody thing."

Yeah, he'd know, too.

"Your father is a wise man." Except for today, of course, when he was doing something extremely stupid. "You should listen to him. And listen to me now. Missing one archery match isn't the end of the world. There'll be plenty of other contests you'll be able to watch."

"But they'll not be *this* one," Stacey wailed. "I heard people speak of it at the faire. They were whispering that Robin Hood will shoot today. 'Tis said he's the best archer in Christendom!"

"He ought to be. I taught him," Sigurd muttered just loud enough for Marian to hear.

Her spine stiffened. That proved it. *He knew*. Now if she only knew what he planned on doing about it.

"Lady Stacey! Just look at ye running about like a wanton with yer hair half done. For shame!"

The bellow came from the massive front entrance, which suddenly seemed a good deal smaller in relative comparison to the broad-beamed figure standing, arms akimbo, on the threshold.

Stacey rolled her eyes as Nurse Godgifu strode out the door toward her. "Marian's hair is not done at all," she pointed out, defiantly holding her ground. "At least I've one good braid."

Godgifu yanked it. "Lady Marian's hair is nay concern of yers, missy. Into the house with ye. Now! If manners were horses, ye'd be walking everywhere ye went."

"No one ever lets me go anywhere anyway, so what difference does it make?" the girl complained. She turned to Marian. "I hope you give me a brother or sister soon. 'Tis most trying being the youngest. *Everyone* thinks they can order you about."

Scowling, she stomped into the house.

Godgifu pursed her lips together, unwilling to tarnish her iron reputation with a laugh, but her eyes twinkled as she gazed after the girl. "Bless the maid, she much reminds me of another young rascal we once had charge of, ay, Sir Sigurd?"

"Aye, mistress." He forced out a noise that was probably meant as a chuckle. It sounded only gruff and sad. "We had our hands full with that one, you and me."

"That we did, but 'twas worth the work. Betwixt the two of us, sir, we reared a good man—and the finest earl this family has known in many a year." She allowed herself the indulgence of a small smile as her eyes held his.

Sigurd didn't smile back. "I once thought so." His gaze lowered and his shoulders slumped, suddenly just an old soldier weighted down by his armor and worries Marian could only guess at. Then just as suddenly, he straightened and faced her, hard steel in his spine, a harder gleam in his eyes.

"By your leave, m'lady. I've nay more time to tarry." Caring little, apparently, whether he had her leave or not, he made a curt bow, shoved his helmet on, and climbed into the saddle with the ease of long practice. The destrier danced beneath him, kicking up loose stones as it pawed the earth in response to its rider's

grim energy.

Marian gaped in shock. He was leaving? Without her? After she'd just asked for a lift to town? She wasn't a child like Stacey, for godssake. She was the Lady of the Manor. Didn't she outrank a steward?

"Hey, wait a minute!" She ran toward him—*whoa*—was forced back by flying hooves when he gathered the reins and swung the stallion's head around for a fast exit. "I'm going with you!"

He glanced over his shoulder at her and laughed. Not at all a nice sound. "You're going into the house is where you're going, m'lady, and there you'll stay. I'll take my chances with you till we see if your lord's seed bears fruit."

Godgifu gasped as he spurred forward and charged down the drive and onto the road. "Merciful saints, I've not seen him like this since the old earl lived—our first Lord Roland. A harsh temper that man had, just like his father, Lord Cymric."

Marian shot her a sharp look, mentally replaying the woman's dialog with Sigurd. The two of them had raised Roland, huh? Which meant Godgifu knew he was no Hunterdon by birth? What else might the nurse know? She studied the worry on the old face as Godgifu stared at the dust cloud left by Sigurd, and realized the woman was almost as scared as she was.

The years peeled back and she saw a younger face in her mind's eye, but still Godgifu's and still worried as she doctored a boy through boils and who knew what other ailments and injuries. Motherly concern then and now. Of course. If the nurse and steward had shared responsibility for their boy-earl's upbringing, Godgifu represented the nurturing, feminine half of that parently equation. Sigurd's allegiance might go more to the title, but hopefully Godgifu's love was for the man.

Trust her, a voice said in Marian's head. She listened to it. She had to. There was no time to do anything else.

"Godgifu?"

"Aye, m'lady?" The woman's gaze stayed fixed on the end of the drive.

Marian stared with her, wondering what they were supposed to be looking at. Scenes from the Hunterdon family history? Nurse Godgifu's memories? She wished she could see some of those memories. They might explain what Sigurd intended and why.

"One way or another I'm going to Nottingham," she said. "But I'd rather go armed with some knowledge. If you have any idea what's happening here, you'd better tell me."

Godgifu breathed a resigned sigh. "If yer concern be Sir Sigurd, I've nary a clue. Whate'er's afoot, there be naught ye nor I can do. Yer lord will handle it, m'lady. He knows what he's doing." A tiny grin quirked the corners of her mouth. "And if he do not...Jon Little does. My Jonny will let nary harm come to him."

Her Jonny? Marian's brow furrowed. Damn. There *was* a family resemblance now that she knew to look for it. She should have guessed it before just from the woman's size. "You're Jonathon Little's mother."

Godgifu's bosom swelled with pride. "Aye. He lived here at the house till yer lord gave him land of his own. Jonny'd do anything for Lord Roland. He loves him like a brother. Thick as thieves they were when lads."

And still were. Literally. *Cough*. Did Godgifu realize that? Marian didn't dare ask. She couldn't speak for choking anyway.

The nurse patted her between the shoulder blades. "M'lady, there be little that happens here I do *not* know of," she answered the unspoken question.

Marian gulped air and battled to regain her balance, those helpful "pats" having nearly knocked her off her feet. "You don't know what Sigurd's up to

though, do you?” she complained when her breath returned. “Sorry,” she added when Godgifu frowned. “Do you at least know what Roland is planning?”

“His trap ye mean?” The frown deepened. “There be nay choice, m’lady. He had to take the sheriff’s position else that swine would have got it. ’Tis better yer lord holds the title than Guy of Gisbourne. But he be caught now by his own bargain. The king wants Robin dead, or Lord Roland’s life be forfeit.”

Good God. *That’s* what Roland agreed to? Boy, that deal had “King John” written all over it. The man loved using lives as collateral. Marian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. This awful mess could have been avoided if Roland had just explained what the king’s terms were. The good news was she finally knew how to stop him—if she could get to Nottingham fast enough to tell him what she knew. And if Sigurd didn’t make trouble first. There was always something, wasn’t there?

“M’lady!” Godgifu squawked as Marian tore past her en route to the stables.

“Not now—I’ll catch you later.”

“Catch *me*?” Confusion colored the woman’s holler. “*I’m* not the one running.”

Neither was Marian once she reached the stables. Nor would she be anytime soon. Her hands fisted in frustration as she scanned the stalls. Empty. The Hunterdon party had cleaned them out for their foray to town. Even the stableman Dirk was gone. Not that she could have ridden him in any case. Hell, who was she fooling? She could hardly ride, period. One short journey on Featherfoot didn’t label her a horsewoman. For that matter, Featherfoot could barely be termed a horse. She took a deep breath and unclenched her hands, forcing herself to think calmly, forcing herself to just *think*.

Okay... She still had her own legs, right?

Right. Score one for her.

And Nottingham wasn’t really that far away. A few hours walk maybe... which would get her there too late.

No. Don’t think about that. The road to Nottingham was just beyond the trees behind the stables. And on a day like today—lovely weather, the last hurrah of the faire, plus a major sporting event in the works—there was bound to be heavy traffic on that road. Everyone and their brother would be heading to town. With such a crowd, traveling should be safe and she could surely hitch a ride with someone. Setting her jaw she marched out the stable doors and angled toward the trees.

Hundreds of voices hushed when a flush-faced figure with runaway ruddy curls and green gown gritty with dust limped onto the archery field outside Nottingham’s town wall. Like a single, sprawling, multi-colored, multi-eyed entity, the crowd stopped and stared.

Marian stared back. People thronged three sides of the field with pavilions dotting the perimeter and a pack of bowmen clustered in the center. A sea of faces surrounded her, wavering in the afternoon sunlight. She wavered with them from sheer exhaustion. So this was where everyone had been hiding. God knew she hadn’t met so much as a beggar on the road. Boy, was she pissed. She stared at a man in motley who stood gaping at her from the edge of the crowd.

“I didn’t think I’d *ever* get here,” she told him. “I had to hoof it the whole frigging way. Do you have any idea how *far* it is from Hunterdon Manor to

Nottingham? Huh? Do you?” A good deal farther than it had seemed yesterday when she’d ridden it.

The man blushed and stammered. “I...I’m sorry, m’lady, I’d not know. I’m from Loxley Town. T’other direction.”

“Loxley?” Her brows pulled together, then shot up. “Oh! You must know Pansy then. Give her my regards.”

She patted him on the shoulder, peered about to get her bearings, then limped straight across the field, taking the shortest route to a raised blur of brocades and satins at the far side—people on a platform seated beneath a bright awning billowing in the breeze. A splash of saffron silk and black braids stood out in the front row.

Marian stopped to wave. “Hi, Cym—”

Whizzz— Something flew past her nose.

Whack! A long feathered shaft pierced a wagon wheel sized thingy with circles painted on it directly to her right.

She leaned over to examine it as cries and curses sounded from down the field. Testy lot, weren’t they?

“Bull’s-eye. Nice job, whoever shot that,” she shouted to the swearing archers, noticing as she did so a ridiculous fellow in ragged red, his features hidden behind a two-day growth of black beard and an eye-patch. *Eye-patch?* We weren’t overplaying things a wee bit, were we?

He pressed his palms to his head when she gripped the imbedded arrow with one hand, using it for support while she raised her foot and pulled off her slipper with the other hand.

“Hang on a sec, boys, I picked up a stone.” She shook it out and slipped her foot back in. “Okay, go right ahead with what you were doing.”

Eyes fixed forward in a glassy stare, she trudged the rest of the way to the platform, hauled up on it and sat, panting, her legs dangling over the edge while she caught her breath. An agitated flurry of French poured out from the row of chairs behind her. Lady Isolde? What was her problem?

“Marian! Roland wished you to stay home. What are you doing here?” Cymrica exclaimed. “You could have been killed just now.”

Marian glanced at her. “You mean I’m not dead already? Feels like it. God, I’m bushed.”

She dragged her legs up, rolled over and balanced on hands and knees a moment, then shoved to her feet and scanned the assembly on the platform—lords and ladies puffed out in plush fabrics, fat in their finery, glittering in their jewels. The area’s aristocracy come to see a good show. She was giving them one, too. Three rows of noble-born eyes returned her scrutiny—all except a pair in the back row.

Sir Guy of Gisbourne’s eyes, sunk deep in shadows like he’d not been sleeping much of late, gazed up, down, sideways, to the front...everywhere but her. Yeah, guilt really sucked, didn’t it? Or was he worried she’d accuse him in public? Stupid creep. Not that she had any impulse to tell him and put his mind at rest, but he wasn’t the concern of the day. Where was—

“Marian, *do* sit.” Isolde tugged her down onto a vacant chair between herself and Cymrica.

Will Scarlet (or should that be Will Gamewell now he was out of the minstrel closet?) sat on Cymrica’s other side, decked out in full lordly regalia and leaning forward to watch the field. Cymrica watched him, an expression on her face Marian had seen on many a football widow during Super Bowl season.

The girl's shoulders heaved with a sigh. "Not even married yet and already he ignores me."

Thwack! Another arrow hit the bull's-eye. Shot by Raggedy Red the Pirate in his eye-patch.

"Hah! Dead center!" Will turned, triumphant, to smile into the back row of seats. "What say you now, Gisbourne?"

Sir Guy's eyes and lips narrowed. "My man hit the black as well. The match is not o're yet."

"Ah, but 'twill be soon. We've but one round to go." Honey dripped from Will's words. "As the gentleman I am, sir, I give you leave to cancel our wager. Whilst you've still time. I'd hate to see you lose so much on the outcome of a few arrows."

Titters and snickering rose up from the assembly. Sir Guy reddened as lords and ladies laughed openly at his expense. Marian almost felt sorry for him. How odd.

"'Tis your own loss you worry on, Gamewell," he growled out, sounding none too sure of that. "The wager holds." He slumped back in his seat, looking haunted, a man already beat.

A sick man, and Marian recognized the illness, realized she was probably the only one present who did. She turned away from him, trying not to think how often she'd seen that same look on her uncle's face.

Out on the field two officials grabbed hold of the target, hoisted and carried it farther away from the shooting line, counting off paces as they went. A lot of paces, on and on, till the outside of Nottingham's town wall at the very end of the range forced them to set it down.

"There! If either of ye hit this, ye deserve a gold arrow," one of the officials called.

"Hit it?" His companion snorted. "They'll be lucky if they can *see* it."

Laughing together, they traipsed back down over the turf.

From the cluster of archers behind the shooting line only two stood forward, a big surly brute in leather, sporting the Gisbourne badge...and the clown in red tatters. The crowd hooted when he strained forward, balancing on his bow like it was a staff, his one eye bugging and his mouth agape at the distance of the target. God, he was laying it on thick.

Will chuckled. Cymrica heaved another sigh.

Marian turned to them both. "This is the last round?"

They nodded.

Crap. How much time did that give her? She gestured toward Grumpy Gus and One-Eyed Jack. "And it's down to just those two?"

"Yes, thank heaven." Cymrica rolled her eyes. "I thought we'd ne'er reach the end of this day. The preliminary rounds took hours. I doubt we've e'er had so many shooting before. Curse Roland and his gold arrow. If he'd stuck with the oxen, we'd be finished by now." Her shoulders slumped. She obviously hadn't a clue why the prize had been changed. Will must know, but he hadn't enlightened her. Probably just as well.

Marian caught his eye. He shot her a wink, and tried to soothe Cymrica's ruffled feathers by wrapping an arm about her and kissing the top of her head.

"My poor weary lass. I'll make it all up to you tonight."

She snuggled into him. "You'd better—"

"Not," Isolde said. With a sly smile she leaned across Marian and pulled Cymrica out of the embrace. "You may make it up to her *after* the wedding, my

lord.”

“The woman’s ne’re had any chastity of her own to worry about, so she guards mine,” Cymrica muttered. “Aren’t I the lucky one? I may as well enjoy the last of the match since I’ve naught to look forward to afterward.”

Disgusted, she flopped back in her chair and gazed out on the field. “What are they waiting for? Oh, I see, Gisbourne’s man has called for a new bow. I doubt ’twill help him much. He shoots well, but the other fellow’s not missed the mark yet. One would think he was Robin Hood himself.”

She laughed at the joke, then suddenly stiffened and paled. Her gaze flashed to Marian. “Blessed Virgin Mother... *That’s* why you’re here?

“Ow,” she said when Will’s foot nudged her in the ankle.

“Careful, dear heart, we’re not alone,” he warned softly.

Cymrica glanced about at the assembly of nobles and turned green. “Um...’tis been pretty weather today, Lord Stephen, has it not?” She grinned at the portly man seated behind them, her face nearly cracking with the effort. Her eyes slanted back to Marian as she turned to the front again. “What are you going to do?” she ground out through the grin.

Good question. Marian wished she had a good answer. She’d abandoned Plan A—catching Roland for a private conference before the event—on the trek here, when she’d realized she’d be lucky to make the event, period. She was left now with Plan B. Only one problem there. She hadn’t figured out what Plan B was.

She stared out over the field, studying the archers and the audience, looking for straws to grab. Sheriff Roland had men hidden in the crowd? How did he plan on springing his trap?

A blaze of red beard and hair jumped out at her from the middle of the crowd, a man, head and shoulders above the rest, pushing his way to the front. She touched Cymrica’s arm and pointed. “Look—is that Jon Little?”

“You’ve met Godgifu’s son, have you?” Cymrica looked. Her forced grin brightened into a genuine smile. “Aye, that’s him. Such a merrie fellow, Jon.” She watched him break clear of the crowd and her smile dropped. “Why is he wearing a sword? Jon scarcely ever wears a sword. His hands are weapons enough. If he needs more, he carries a quarterstaff.”

“*Ahem.*” Will cleared his throat. “I believe Roland has pressed the man into sheriff’s service for the day.”

“He has?” Cymrica frowned.

Marian frowned with her as Jon took up position at the inner edge of the field near the shooting line. Damn, so that was the plan. Little Jon had drawn the winning number. Boy, he looked tickled pink about it. Who wouldn’t be thrilled at the prospect of killing their best friend and the people’s hero right in front of that hero’s admirers? Poor Jon.

How were they going to stage it? Maybe Roland had a wine skin or something full of blood under his clothes. *He wins the match, Jon rushes in and stabs through the fabric, hero falls down bloody, and Jon carries off the “body” before anyone can examine it.* That’d work if no one got in the way.

A big *if* because there were plenty to interfere. They might have figured on some backlash from the crowd. Roland must have other men, less in the know, planted about just to keep the peasantry at bay. But he probably wasn’t expecting whatever was on Sigurd’s mind. Which left the biggest question...

She turned and whispered to Cymrica. “Where’s Sir Sigurd?”

The girl’s brows rose. “Sigurd?” She twisted around in her seat to survey the crowd at the end of the field. “He ought to be... Yes, there he is, in that group

behind the archers. See? He sat with us this morn, then moved at the midday break. He's been stationed there with nearly two score men all afternoon."

Uh-huh. And Roland didn't find anything suspicious about that? Marian did. "Is that where he usually watches the second half of the contest from?"

Cymrica shook her head. "Oh no. Normally he watches it all from up here. But he said he had other business today. What was it?" She reached across Marian and tapped Isolde. "Aunt, did Sigurd say why he was moving to the field?"

"Eh, I scarcely listened, *cherie*. Men's plans. They forever play at soldiers, no? Like little boys with their toys." Isolde dismissed it with a shrug. "I should think he but follows orders from Roland."

"Perhaps." Cymrica sounded unconvinced. "But where's Roland? He should be sitting here as well, but we've not seen him since he left the house this morn."

That's what you think. Marian's eyes met Will's. Both quickly looked elsewhere.

Will patted Cymrica's hand. "Do you not recall, dearest? Roland said he'd be occupied with, um, sheriff's duties today."

"Ah, *oui*." Isolde perked up. "I remember now. Sigurd *did* say Roland told him to stay near the shooting. He said they needed extra men on hand to ensure all would proceed fairly." She smiled, pleased to have the matter settled.

If only it were. Marian perched stiffly on the edge of her chair. Roland certainly needed extra men standing by, but she doubted he'd chosen his steward for the job. He thought Sigurd was senile. She knew the man wasn't. Where did that leave them?

She gazed down the length of the field, feeling the air crackle with tension. Behind the shooting line, Sigurd and his men slowly separated from the thick of the crowd and moved forward. On level with the shooting line, right at the edge of the crowd, stood Jon, looking utterly morbid. He glanced to the side and his posture straightened in alert. What did he see?

Oh, Sigurd's men spreading out, flanking the back end of the range. A bad sign. Jon hadn't expected them. Had Roland?

Hell, Lord Hot-Shot didn't even see them. He was too busy amusing his multitude of fans by helping his opponent select a new bow from the several offered. Right along with the Gisbourne man he tested each one, holding them aloft, trying them upside down and backward, and spouting ribald commentary in a broad country accent on their pros and cons. Sir Guy's guy seemed not the least bit appreciative of the aid. He finally snatched up his choice and waved the others away.

"Aye! That be the one I'd a took!" Happy Jack in red slapped him on the back. He got a ferocious glower in response.

"Some people have so little sense of humor," Will said.

"Yes, and right now I'm one of them," Cymrica muttered. She cast a worried look at the two finalists on the field and reached for Marian's hand. "Roland would hate to lose you, I hope you know that," she whispered. "I'd hate to lose you, too."

What was she getting at? Marian shot her a sideways glance.

Cymrica's eyes stayed focused on the field. "Aunt Isolde is most fond of you also," she continued whispering. "And Stacey had naught but good to say of you last night. She loves you already and she's so excited to have a mother. 'Twould break her heart if—"

Oh, good grief. "Cymrica, it's all right." Marian squeezed her hand. "I'm not planning on running away with...you-know-who." The girl didn't really know, of course, but there was no help for that.

Cymrica sank back in relief. “Thank heaven. Now I can truly enjoy the final round. Unless...” She popped forward again, her gaze landing hard on Robin Redbreast on the shooting line. “You, ah, do not think *he* might try something foolish, do you?”

Like what? Kidnapping Maid Marian out of the grandstand? Ha ha ha—

Gulp. Marian’s eyes widened. God, there was an idea.

She noticed Cymrica wince, and realized she was crunching the girl’s hand. With a shaky laugh, she relaxed her grip.

“Um, no,” she said. “I think he’s already been foolish enough for one day.”

She was the foolish one if she thought she could manage this.

Chapter 17

"I wish I'd known earlier who he was. I'd have watched his shooting more closely," Cymrica complained. She still whispered, but Will nudged her with his foot again in warning.

"Stop kicking me." She batted aggrieved eyes at him, then turned full attention to the match and explained the proceedings to Marian at normal volume, like a sport's announcer.

"Each man gets three arrows, shot all in a row. Watch, they're tossing the coin now to see who shoots first... Oh.'Tis Gisbourne's man." She pouted in disappointment. "That gives him the advantage."

"He'll need it." Will chuckled and looked over his shoulder at the back row where Sir Guy sat rigid as a rock, staring at the shooting line.

Lady Isolde grabbed the opportunity to turn around also, and flutter her lashes at chubby Lord Stephen.

"She's been making eyes at him all day," Cymrica hissed in Marian's ear. "The woman is desperate."

So am I. Marian held her breath as Sir Guy's man fitted an arrow to the string, pulled back and let it fly. In smooth succession two more followed.

Zip—zip—zip! All three landed in the black bull's-eye of the target and the crowd cheered. They had to.

"By St. Swithin's nose!" Lord Stephen exclaimed. "'Tis the best shooting we've seen this day."

"Aye." Sir Guy collapsed back in his chair, looking like a man who'd just dodged a giant bullet. And he didn't even know what a bullet was.

"He's won?" Marian's jaw dropped. She'd have cheered with the crowd if regret hadn't sat next to relief inside her. Robin never lost an archery match in the legends. It would be like the shattering of some deep universal truth to see him lose now, like discovering the earth really was flat instead of round. Of course, most of the people around her probably did think it was flat, but that was beside the point.

Cymrica slouched against her, evil-eyed and sullen. "He's not won yet, but 'twill be nigh impossible to beat him." She pointed to the target backed by Nottingham's wall—a raised circle from where they sat; from the shooting line it must look like a dot. "He's left an opening in the center of the black inside his arrows—the size of a silver penny mayhap."

"That big?" Marian wasn't comforted. "And to win, one would have to shoot an arrow into that spot?"

"Not one arrow. All three," Cymrica said.

Damn.

They stared at the target, then each other.

Behind them, Lord Stephen laughed. "By St. Swithin's nose, Gisbourne's man is the victor. I'll warrant not even that scoundrel Robin Hood could best him now."

Thanks, Steve. Rub it in.

Marian shook her head when Cymrica swung about to glare at the man. "Oh, leave him alone. He's right."

She sighed, the hiss of her breath blending with the sudden twang of a bowstring.

Huh?

With a sharp *crack* an arrow hit the inside mark. *Snap*—a second one struck—then a third, slicing in between the other two so closely that together the three looked like a single fat shaft sticking out the center of the bull’s-eye.

Finished before anyone could blink.

Stunned silence fell over the field—mouths hanging open, countless eyes wide and staring. A vast peoplescape of figures frozen in awe.

“By St. Swithin’s nose,” Lord Stephen breathed out.

“Oh, *blow* St. Swithin’s nose.” Screaming, Cymrica leapt to her feet. “Yes, yes, *yessss!* He did it! He wins!”

Her shout started the whole crowd cheering—everyone but a burly man in the back row of the platform, who sank his head in his hands, and Marian sitting paralyzed in the front while the archery field erupted around her.

People poured onto the shooting range, trying to mob their new champion. Men with swords appeared suddenly to hold them back. Sheriff’s men? They must be. Many of them wore the Hunterdon badge. But too many of them seemed to be taking their orders from Sir Sigurd. Striding through the thick of things, gesturing and calling like a general directing his troops, the old man had never looked better. He’d also never looked worse.

He spread out his men in a circle, creating a human barricade around the archers on the field. Then the circle closed inward like the coil of a spring winding tight. In moments all the other archers were forced out, leaving only one in the center, his posture tense beneath flapping rags, his one-eyed gaze sharp with surprise. Like a fox bayed by hounds, he poised warily, pivoting about in a half-crouch, looking for a way to break clear. Was his surprise genuine, or was he just continuing his act?

Little Jon ran toward the circle, his hand on the hilt of his sword. A silent scream caught in Marian’s throat. Dread froze her heart in mid-beat. Here it came—No, it didn’t.

Air rushed back into her lungs when the raised swords of Sigurd’s men blocked Jon’s entry into the circle. For a second she was truly grateful to Sigurd. Boy, she’d hated the idea of having to watch Little Jon kill Robin Hood.

The big man stumbled back a pace, shock, then alarm, then fury registering on his face. Snarling in his beard, he whipped his sword out of its sheath and charged forward again.

“Jon, no!” A shout from Roland stopped him.

That settled it. Sigurd’s actions weren’t part of the arrangements. Roland’s trap had sprung on him from the wrong direction. Whatever the danger was now, it was real.

A buzzing rose up from the crowd, like a swarm of angry hornets. That was their hero there ringed by armed men. Not just their new archery champion, but the one who gave aid when the rest of the world drained them dry with taxes and tithes and harsh laws. Most of them must realize by now who he was—not *all* of who he was, but enough to be fighting mad at seeing him threatened. There’d be a peasant’s revolt soon if someone didn’t do something. Robin’s life was no longer the only one at stake. Dozens, maybe hundreds of innocent people could be injured and killed. And none of it would be fake.

Nervous mutterings sounded from the nobles behind her. Some called for grooms and pages to bring their horses. “By St. Swithin’s nose,” Lord Stephen repeated over and over again.

Will sprang to his feet, a short sword in a jeweled sheath snapping against his thigh with the motion. “I’ll see if there’s aught I can do. You ladies had best stay

here. I'll send men to guard this section."

Yanking his sword free, he leapt off the platform and ran toward the hub of the action—two circles now, Sigurd's group on the inside, brandishing sword and axe, hemmed in by country folk armed with little more than anger. To exit the field the soldiers would have to cut through the crowd. They looked prepared to do just that.

Cymrica stood glaring at them. "What in the name of Heaven does Sigurd think he's doing? If these are Roland's orders, I'll—" She left the sentence hanging as her gaze flashed to Marian. *Oh brother, the shit's hit the fan, hasn't it? I'm so sorry*, her eyes said. Maybe not in those exact words but the intent was the same.

"I, ah, think 'twould be best if you do stay here," she said aloud. "But there may be something I can do to help. I'm going with Will. She drew her eating knife from her belt, hopped down and raced after him.

"*Mon Dieu.*" Lady Isolde clutched her breast. "Men! They pick the worst times for their silly games. Could they not have waited till *after* we gave the gold arrow? What good is a contest without a prize, eh? Every year we give one. And I had such a pretty speech to say this year. They have spoiled the best part of the day!"

You had to love the woman. All hell might break loose around her, but she kept her priorities straight. Have contest, award prize, *then* fight if you had to. Marian hated to see her disappointed. Besides, that damn arrow could be the key she needed to unlock Sigurd's circle.

"I'll award it," she told Isolde, then glanced around them. "Um...where is it?"

"Above you, *cherie*, but you must not—"

Too late. Marian spotted the thing suspended horizontally from the front of the platform's awning where it captured the afternoon light and gleamed like a solid sunbeam. What a cool way to display it. They'd never have been able to do *that* with the oxen. Stretching up on her toes, she reached for it. Drat, sometimes it was such a pain not being tall. She stepped back, took a breath, and jumped—caught it with both hands.

So...why wouldn't it come loose?

While Isolde squawked out a stream of frantic French, Marian flew back and forth on the arrow like a trapeze artist. Not exactly what she'd intended.

"By St. Swithin's nose!" Lord Stephen said.

God, she was sick of that nose. Who was St. Swithin anyway?

Rip! The arrow tore free on a backward swing and she landed in Lord Stephen's lap.

Sorry, Steve.

"By St.—"

"Archibald's eyeballs," she finished for him just to give him a new swear. It seemed the least she could do since he'd broken her fall. Clutching the arrow she scrambled over the front row of chairs and off the platform.

"Marian! I have not told you the pretty speech to say when you present the prize," Isolde called after her.

The lady was a fruitcake. Or maybe a French pastry. Nutty or flaky, either worked.

"I'll wing it," Marian called back. What she'd say wasn't the problem. *How* she'd say it was. She'd have to *perform*. St. Swithin and his nose help her.

The noise of the crowd rose in volume as she covered the distance at a run. A press of dusty, sweaty bodies barred her way when she reached the hot spot. Too

many shoving shoulders and shouting mouths. Not enough time to push through them.

She skidded up short, drew in a chestful of air, and let it out. “*Quiet!*”

The whole field hushed. Wow. A good bellow came in handy now and then. Thank goodness she’d discovered this morning that she had one.

As all eyes turned to her, she raised the prize high over her head, letting the sunlit shaft shine out like a beacon. Faces lifted to stare. Faces well acquainted with empty pockets and empty bellies. Beggar and serf, tinker, tanner, alewife... Faces looking up from the lower rungs of society to stare at wealth-for-the-taking in a lone woman’s hand. Anger and fear permeated the air, a tangible stink rising over the smells of trampled turf and the crush of warm flesh before her. The mood this mob was in, they might decide to just mug her for the gold. And who could blame them? Her heart ached with sympathy even as her knees shook from raw nerves.

“I’m here to give this to the winner. Will you let me through to him, please?”

The faces turned to look at each other. Eyebrows quirked up in question. Had the lady been out in the sun too long? The irate buzzing began again.

“They’ll nay let ye nigh him,” a rough voice shouted. “He’s been arrested on orders from the sheriff.”

The hell he had. Sigurd had taken over the show. Why and what he planned to do with his captive was still up for grabs. The curious thing was he’d saved Roland from his own trap. Had that been the idea all along?

Sudden doubt struck her. What if she’d misjudged the old man? Maybe he was just trying to help? Maybe he’d thought Roland’s plan too risky, that Robin Hood’s identity would be exposed and the Hunterdons ruined. But if this arrest was Sigurd’s alternate plan, he certainly hadn’t cleared it with Roland first, and there was another risk now. He’d never get his prisoner off the field without innocent blood being spilled. Maybe Sigurd didn’t care about that, but Roland would. Marian darn sure did.

She planted her feet, swallowed, and spoke above the buzz. “They’ll let me see him, I think. I...I’m Marian of Hunterdon.” And this was the first time she’d announced herself as such. It felt kind of weird. Hopefully she’d get used to it in time. Hopefully she’d *have* the time to get used to it.

“Lord Roland’s lady?”

“Aye, the sheriff’s wife!”

The news raced from person to person while she waited on tenterhooks. Seconds seemed hours. The new sheriff wasn’t particularly popular at the moment. Nor was his lady probably. They could kill her. They could mob her and hold her hostage as a bargaining chip for the “sheriff’s prisoner.” That last wasn’t a bad idea, actually. She half hoped they’d do it. It would save her the upcoming performance. She’d be able to act genuinely terrified. She was now, she knew that.

A brawny arm waved up from the inside of the crowd and there sounded a new voice. “Make way for her!”

Wait a minute... Was that Little Jon? God bless him. Her heart slowed from a gallop to a rocky trot. Not so dramatic as the parting of the Red Sea but equally miraculous, feet shuffled aside and opened a narrow path. On rubbery legs Marian walked down it, clutching the arrow to her breast.

Now for the tricky part...

Bodies closed in behind her as she moved forward, pressing her on till she reached the circle of swords at the center of the crowd—three dozen nervously sweating men, shoulder to shoulder in a tight ring, their mailed backs to their

captive and their eyes fixed outward. An armored island surrounded by a stormy sea of taunts and jeers. Sigurd's company might be primed for battle, but few looked enthusiastic about it. Most looked scared shitless. The poor chap directly in front of her stood awkwardly like he'd already soiled his britches.

"This your first time facing down a mob? Mine, too," she told him while a red clad figure several paces behind him went through numerous stealthy antics trying to catch her attention. He succeeded. She saw each one of his subtle hand gestures, winced inwardly at every black scowl and one-eyed glare.

She read his unspoken message—*Marian, get the hell out of here!*—and ignored it.

Her gaze touched his just long enough to beam back a silent answer: *Get a life. I'm busy.*

"What's your name?" she asked the damp desperate fellow before her.

"Uh... Alfred, m'lady."

"Well, Uh-Alfred, you see this arrow here?" She tapped the point of the gold shaft on the tip of his nose.

His eyes crossed looking at it. "Aye, m'lady—"

"Alfred!"

The man jerked to attention. Marian worked frantically to shove a ramrod down her spine as Sir Sigurd detached from the ranks and strode across the open center of the circle toward her. His head turned and his eyes locked on Roland's as he passed by him—just for a second, too short for her to decipher their expressions, but Roland's hands fisted at his sides.

"M'lady, 'twould have been better had you heeded me and remained at the house. This is hardly a safe place for you." Sigurd barely glanced at her. He gave her a curt nod over Alfred's shoulder, in lieu of a bow, then barked in the poor man's ear. "Escort Lady Marian from the field!"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Alfred." Forcing a smile, Marian waved the arrow in front of his face. His eyes followed it like it was a hypnotist's pendulum. "I'm here to give this to our new archery champion. These nice people around us *want* to see me give it to him. I don't think we should disappoint them. Do you?"

Behind her, the crowd grumbled agreement.

Alfred looked like he'd just messed his britches again.

Sigurd looked like he wanted to mess everyone's britches. "Yon champion, m'lady, is a known outlaw and under arrest. Thus the prize is forfeit."

"I don't see why. What does one have to do with the other?" she argued. "Whatever else he is he still won the contest, didn't he?"

"Aye!" chorused the crowd.

So far, so good. Marian peered about and spotted the other contestants standing in a sheepish cluster at the inner edge of the crush.

"Do any of you care to dispute that?" Her gaze landed on Sir Guy's man.

He stared hard back at her, a nerve twitching in his jaw, and she held her breath, expecting a protest, wishing she'd never asked him. Roland was right. She was lousy at this. She'd carried the bluff too far and blown the whole thing.

Suddenly the glare cracked into a grin. "Nay, m'lady. I wisht I could say otherwise, but he won it fair. I've ne're seen such shooting. If anyone deserves the prize, 'tis him."

He inclined his head in a small bow to the figure guarded by the swords, the tattered fellow who stood grinding his teeth.

Marian gave the Gisbourne man a grateful smile for being so surprisingly supportive. Especially compared to Roland who was being a pain in the ass.

"I don't *want* the bloody prize," he bit out.

Not making things easy, was he? She stared down her nose at him, thinking *take-charge-noblewoman*. How would Catherine the Great handle this?

"*You* are in no position to say what you want one way or the other. Be still, knave. I'll have you gagged if you can't hold your tongue."

He made a noise like he'd swallowed his tongue. Close enough. At least he shut up. Maybe she was finally starting to get the hang of this game.

Then again, maybe not. She gasped when the arrow almost jumped out of her hands. Her grip tightened just in time to save it from Sigurd's grab. Sneaky old fart.

His eyes blazed down at her as he wrestled inwardly with his temper. "M'lady, release it to me. If you insist on this folly, *I'll* present the arrow."

Ah. Trying for a compromise were we? An attempt to placate the crowd by allowing their hero his trophy?

No deal.

She angled away when he grabbed for the gold again. "You can't. I have to do it." *Why?* "It's Hunterdon tradition. The presiding lady of the manor always awards the prize. It would be..." *What?* "Bad luck!" *That's it.* She lowered her voice, trying to sound prophetic. "It would bring down ill fortune if anyone else did it."

Sigurd's eyes went wary.

Bingo. The old fox knew she was right about the tradition. He looked superstitious enough to not risk the rest. In fact, gauging by his reaction now, his medieval mind might be more superstitious than most. Interesting.

He cast a nervous glance over his shoulder at the scowling prisoner some yards behind him, then studied Marian, who met his perusal unblinking in an effort to look innocent. The peasants pressing in at her back hushed, staring curiously while the steward made his decision.

"Very well, m'lady." Resigned but hardly happy about it, Sigurd moved aside. "Stand back, you! Let the lady pass." He slapped Alfred in the head, probably wishing the man was Marian.

Poor Alfie, this just wasn't his day. Marian shot him a weak smile as she stepped around him on suddenly shaking legs.

Sigurd's hand on her arm halted her. "On one condition, m'lady. No dallying. You do this swiftly, then leave the field."

Was that all? Good. They'd finally found something they agreed on.

"That's exactly what I intend. I'll be out of here before you know it," she assured him, and made straight for the lone figure in the center of the circle, her heart hammering against her ribs. Around her the field whirled, people and noise blurring like the spokes of a runaway wheel. Herself the axel on which it turned. The weight of a thousand stares bore down. Only one crushed her.

Anger in Roland's eye she'd prepared for. The love in his gaze as he watched her approach nearly dropped her in her tracks. Love full of pain and apology. An "I love you" that looked like "good-bye."

Oh God... He expected to be killed. Not only was the threat real, the danger was the worst she'd imagined. She stumbled to a stop before him and nailed her feet to the earth to keep from hurling herself into his arms.

Wait. Not yet. Sigurd wasn't playing. Neither could she. *Do this right.*

Anxiety turned to genuine fear, knifing her in the gut. A scream built inside her. She let it. She'd need it in a moment. On damp palms, she raised the gold prize, balancing it horizontally, chest high in front of her. "*Ahem...* Here, sir, this is yours for proving yourself the best archer in Sherwood. I, um, understand there's a speech that goes with it, but I didn't have time to learn it. Sorry."

Roland stood like a statue, staring across the arm's length of air as though it were a chasm separating them. "Marian, why are you doing this? You shouldn't be here." Whispered words, barely a hiss on the breeze, and a look that pierced her like one of his arrows, straight through the heart. "You *have* to get out. Fast. There's a battle brewing. I'll try to fight my way free, but I can't do a damn thing with you near."

"Yeah, well, I would have stayed home and watched the contest on the sports channel, but I couldn't get any reception," she whispered back. "You must have forgotten to pay the cable bill."

What? No laughter? Okay, she didn't really think it was funny either. She raised the arrow higher. "Come on, take it. Everyone's waiting." She felt Sigurd's eyes drilling a hole in her back. "We don't have much time."

"No, we don't. We haven't had nearly enough time, have we?" He shook his head, not in refusal but a heartbreak of regret.

Her knees almost buckled at the longing in his gaze. He stared as though memorizing her features, like he wanted to carry the image of her to his grave. And his grave might be all too close.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I never meant for it to turn out this way. You were right. Something went wrong." His mouth lifted at one corner, a sad crooked shadow of his grin. "I should have heeded Murphy's Law."

"Screw Murphy. Just take the damn thing, will you?" She had to move while her legs still worked, before she collapsed in tears at his feet.

"And then you'll go?" His gaze hardened. "Promise me, Marian. I want you well away from here. Go back to the house. I'll join you if I can, but whatever happens, Godgifu and Jon will see no harm comes to you or Stacey. I've given them money enough to get you all out of the country if needed. You'll be safe with them."

I don't want to be safe. I want to be with you. Blast him for clawing her heart, for turning this into a final farewell. She couldn't be certain it wasn't.

"I promise." Her voice shook, but thank God she could tell him the truth because he'd sure as hell spot a lie. "Grab the arrow and I'll go." *With you.* So all right, she didn't have to tell him that part.

"Good girl." The grin reappeared, still sad, but sexy to the last. His lips formed the words *I love you*, and he reached for the prize. His fingers grazed hers before curling around the middle of the shaft, trying to offer her a lifetime of loving in one tiny good-bye caress.

The gesture sent shock waves through her. She clenched the arrow in convulsive response—but then, she'd planned to do that anyway. She hung on as he pulled it toward him and went with it straight into his arms, swinging about at the last instant so her back landed against his front. Quickly, she shoved one hand behind herself to secure the position. The crowd gasped. Voices called out, some in shock, some cheering Robin Hood's bold move.

Thank God. It worked. They thought he'd grabbed her along with the gold.

For added realism, she let out the scream that had been building in her. A good scream. It sounded authentic because it was, and if the motivation for it was not what it seemed, no one knew that but her. And Roland.

Cursing under his breath, he tried to push her away. Her hand sandwiched between them stopped him. She'd grabbed a prize shaft of her own. The one between his legs.

"Ow! Marian—" Instead of releasing her, he was forced to clutch her closer. His whisper hissed in her ear. "What the hell do you think you're doing? Let go!"

"That's not what you said last night when I touched you there."

"This isn't a joke, damn it. You're going to get yourself killed."

"No, I'm getting *you* out of here. We're leaving together. *Now*. The crowd's on your side already. All we have to worry about are the sheriff's men. You're going to use me as your shield to break through them."

"I'm *what*? Uhh—" His breath sucked in sharply when she squeezed him hard enough to show she meant business.

"You heard me. Stop stalling. We can do this." She said it for herself as much as him. Real fear tinged her voice as she shouted to the soldiers ringed around them, fear that they'd see through her ploy. "Stay back, all of you! He has a knife! He says he'll kill me if you don't let him through!"

"How did that sound?" she whispered to Roland.

He groaned. "I just saw my whole life pass before my eyes. Yours, too."

Spit. She didn't sound that bad. She sounded scared, she knew she did. She *was* scared. "You're only saying that because you want me to stop."

"You've got that right."

"Well, I won't." She strained her head about to peer into his uncovered eye, her lower lip pushed out in defiance.

He groaned again, a deep throated, guttural groan that vibrated against her spine. Suddenly she had a lot more of him in her hand to hold on to.

"Marian, *don't* do that. I'll be kissing you in a minute instead of 'killing' you. That pout drives me crazy."

"You *are* crazy." *Good frigging...* "Can't you ever think of anything but sex?"

"No. Not with the feel of you against me, I can't. Sorry."

"Feel this." Her fingers bit into his testicles.

"*Arrghh!*"

"Very good. That sounded really angry, really desperate. Just like you're supposed to sound."

"I *am* desperate," he ground out. "This will never work. Both of us could be the best actors in the world—it makes no difference. Sigurd *knows* I'd never harm you."

"Yeah, but no one else knows it. We're doing this for the masses, sweetie, to protect Robin Hood's identity. Sigurd wants to keep that secret as much as you do. And he wants me safe, I think. He'll keep the soldiers back for that, if nothing else. He won't risk me being hit by a stray blow."

"How do you know he won't? He completely blindsided me today. At this point, I'd not put anything past him." Sorrow mixed with the anger in his whisper, the hurt of betrayal.

Marian understood. This must feel almost like his own father had stabbed him between the shoulder blades. She looked across the circle to see Sigurd glaring at them. She glared back. Right then, she hated him. But he'd keep her in one piece—at least for the moment.

"He'll guard me because he wants heirs for the Hunterdons, and he..." Her voice caught in her throat at the thought. "He's hoping I'm carrying one."

Damn the man, but she hoped so, too.

So did Roland.

“Dear God... Sweetheart...” His arms pulled her closer. His hand flattened over her belly. He almost nuzzled her neck.

No. He was turning their hostage pose into a lovers’ embrace. Her fingers dug into him to snap him out of it.

“*Arrghh!*”

“Sorry, dear, but we *do* have to get out of here.”

“How am I supposed to move anywhere with you hanging onto my balls?”

“Robin’s a clever fellow. He’ll figure it out. Start walking!”

He sighed. “You’re not going to let me out of this, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Wench.” A low growl rumbled out of him. “All right—but we’ll do it *my* way.”

Chapter 18

Marian shrieked in surprise as an iron grip closed over her wrist, popping open her hold on him.

"Here, hold this instead," he said, and thrust the gold arrow into her hand. His left arm locked about her waist, hoisting her against his side, straight off the ground. He spun on one foot like a dancer, pivoting three hundred and sixty degrees, taking in the whole circle at a glance. Then he feinted to the left, turned sharply and charged to the right, whipping out a dagger from his belt as he ran.

Swords rose to meet him, blades flashing like white fire in the sun. The crowd roared. Someone barked orders. Sigurd? Was he trying to call off his dogs?

Yes. She'd been right, he didn't want her harmed, but Marian could barely hear him over the din. Unfortunately, neither could his men.

Two lunged forward, side by side, one swinging a double-edged sword, the other a two-headed axe. Something akin to panic lit their eyes. A grim smile lit Roland's, a smile she'd never seen on him before. A battle smile.

He parried a sword strike with his dagger while lashing out with his foot and kicking the axe man hard in the groin. *Ouch*. That must have hurt. The fellow crumpled onto the turf, moaning.

His comrade bellowed like a bull and swung his sword up, preparing for a downward slice. Roland ducked under the blade, spun about and cracked him in the back of the neck with his elbow. All this while clutching Marian to his side.

Damn, he was good.

The swordsman's eyes rolled back in his head and—*plop*—down he went face-first into the dirt while Roland turned to face an attack from what looked like the whole bloody company.

Sigurd shouted a halt. Half of them heard and obeyed. The rest kept coming.

"Wait—wait—wait a minute!" Marian screamed. Enough was enough.

The attackers froze in mid-strike, their weapons raised high.

Furiously, she glared at them. "Put those damn things down! What are you, fucking nuts? Do you *see* me here? I'm being held hostage for godssake! Do you *realize* that? Are you *trying* to get me killed? Is that what you want? Huh? *Back off*—all of you!"

They did.

Blades lowered and the men stood shuffling their feet, clearing their throats, and casting sheepish glances at each other. Around them, the peasants pressed in, gawking.

"Um, beggin' your pardon, m'lady, but we were trying to rescue you," one of the soldiers said, his cheeks burning red.

The others nodded vigorously.

Marian narrowed her eyes. "Uh-huh. I'll just bet you were."

Idiots.

All the stuffing knocked out of her, she collapsed against Roland who was making odd strangling noises. The sound of laughter being choked back, and not easily.

"I'm glad you find it so amusing," she grumbled under her breath as his grip loosened and he let her slip to her feet. His arm shifted to her shoulders, protectively, like a mother hen drawing a chick under her wing. He dipped his head to whisper in her ear.

"Sweetheart, I doubt you're aware of it, but you just gave a five-star performance."

I did?

Son of a gun, she had. Her knees went weak and his arm tightened to hold her upright.

"Come on, love, let's go. Methinks we'd best blow this scene whilst the going's good."

Mmm... Somehow it sent such a giddy thrill through her when he mixed modern and medieval expressions. For her ears only. 'Twas like they had their own private language.

The archery field receded, the rim of pavilions and the backdrop of the city's wall fading away, figures and voices shrinking to a distant kaleidoscope of colors and sound spinning about the outer edge of her consciousness. Nothing at the center but the shelter of a strong arm, the electric charge of a body coiled for action. Her whole world scaled down to the warm scent and feel of one man, his aura shining out like a jewel. Roland? Robin?

Hers. All she needed. More than enough.

Keeping her close under his wing, he hurried her past sword and axe and into the cover of the crowd. The common people swept in around them, cheering and laughing, a guard of several hundred giving them safe passage off the field. With Robin Hood's escape the afternoon's tension blossomed into revelry. The "lower rungs" had come out on top for once. Victories like this were few and far between. A party atmosphere prevailed.

"I feel like a rock star," Roland muttered. "I don't deserve this."

Hands clapped him on the back. Bodies jostled him in an effort to get close to Sherwood's favorite rebel, the man who dared thumb his nose at the stiff status quo. The street kid who'd grown into the underdog's champion because he knew what it was like to be born on the bottom of the heap.

She had him all figured now. Marian glanced at his face to see him blushing under his tan. God, he was cute.

"Yes, you do deserve it," she whispered. "You *are* a star. They love you."

So do I, her eyes told him.

Voices called out encouragement and goodwill, most for Robin, but a few kind words for his "shield."

"Ne're ye fear, lady, he'll let ye go anon."

"I'd be pleased to trade places with her." An unforgettable cackle followed the offer. "And he can *keep* me!"

Pansy. Cripes, she was everywhere.

"Nay need to frown so, m'lady," someone else called.

Well, yes, she was scowling just then.

"Aye, m'lady, ye be safe. 'Twas a grand joke he played on the sheriff's men, but Robin wouldst ne're harm a woman. All who love him knowest that."

Marian's interest perked up. "They do?"

"They'd better," Roland said. "I've given the wood-devils few rules to play by, but that's one of them—no harm to women of any class for any reason."

Of course. She should have known. "That's right out of the legends. It's part of the creed Robin sets for his followers."

"It is?" A grin lightened his tone. "I'm afraid all I know of the traditional Robin Hood is what I got out of watching Errol Flynn play him. You'd better tell me the real story sometime."

"I don't have to, lover. You're creating it." She wrapped an arm around his waist, the hostage hugging her captor. If that looked suspicious...

Oh hell, let tongues wag a bit if they wanted. How else would Maid Marian e're make it into the legends at Robin Hood's side?

His chest shook with a humorless laugh. "I think I've created more than I intended. We're far from safe, sweetheart. Even if I didn't have Sigurd to worry about now, there's King John. The way things stand, I may have to retreat into Sherwood and become Errol Flynn for good."

"Great. I've always wanted to be Olivia de Havilland."

"Marian, I'm serious. You don't understand the situation."

"Hah." Only because he hadn't told her everything. "I understand more than you do. Godgifu clued me in to the king's terms. Believe me, he's the least of your problems."

"Oh no... I feel a history lesson coming on."

"Very funny. Just be glad I have that history degree." Whoever would have thought she'd get this kind of use from it? The best part was she had an extra eight hundred years to pay off her student loans.

They'd been whispering, but she hushed her voice even more to keep anyone from overhearing. God forbid she get a reputation as a fortuneteller. King John in particular took a dim view of people predicting his demise. He'd had one poor hermit killed for it already. Or was that coming up? Darn, but she couldn't remember the exact date of that incident. She remembered the date that would mean the most to Roland though.

He lowered his head to catch her words.

"I hate to sound like a prophet of doom, but King John will be dead in about three years. And from now till then he's going to have his hands full." *The forced signing of the Magna Carta, dealings with the Pope, a threatened invasion from France...* "He'll have much bigger things to bother with than a Sherwood outlaw."

"I hope you're right. He was, shall we say, *royally* pissed when we sealed the agreement."

"I'm not surprised. That was the morning after your little bedtime joke. He must have wanted Robin's fanny nailed to the wall that day. I'm guessing he's over it by now though."

"If only I could say the same about Godgifu. I don't think she'll ever let me hear the end of that 'joke.' Pity. It seemed such a bright idea at the time."

"Well, at least she got a nice broach out of it. I'm just sorry you couldn't see the looks on their faces that morning. I thought Lord Clarence was going to pee his pants. I think King John did." Sudden laughter bubbled up within her and refused to be quelled. Roland caught it from her and they both erupted in howls, shaking and clinging to each other as they struggled to keep their legs moving under the onslaught. Together they rode the waves of hilarity off the field.

Years of anxiety poured out of Marian with the laughter, a lifetime of longing releasing with the sound. She laughed at herself more than anything. The girl who'd dreamed without hope, who'd wanted to be like Maid Marian—not just because Maid Marian had someone like Robin Hood, but because she was all those strong, brave things Plain Marian wasn't. An impossible dream. She'd always known that, and darn if she hadn't been proved right. She wasn't *like* Maid Marian. She *was* Maid Marian. *The* Maid Marian. A stupendous joke. One hell of a good one on her. She laughed till she cried, the tears blinding her as they moved forward in each other's arms.

Only when they reached the crossroads beyond the archery field, where the forest road bisected the route that ran around Nottingham and the trees of Sherwood stood but a stone's throw away, did she realize the crowd around them had thinned down to several dozen—a cross section of rough-hewn peasant stock and craftsmen with one broad-beamed friar in their midst. All of them striding along hale and hearty and grinning from ear to ear. Very merrie men.

Uh-huh. She tried hard to smile at them as Roland signaled a halt and she tallied up the faces she recognized. The friar, the beefy faire-ward Diccon, the sharp one she'd hired. Little Jon—no surprise to see him here. And a brawny archer in leather whose presence shocked the heck out of her.

"Say hello to the wood-devils," Roland whispered.

"I can't," she rasped out. "'Hello' won't appear for about seven centuries. It was invented for answering the telephone."

"It was? Well, damn, no wonder everyone looks at me funny when I say it." He peered about at the group, his mouth grim, the twinkle in his eye pure amusement. "I thought I told you lads to not interfere today."

"Ye did?" The man in leather gazed back, all innocence. "I must have forgot. I saw the prize and the gleam of it went straight to me heart." He grinned. "I sore wanted that gold arrow."

"You almost got it." An answering grin cracked Roland's face as he lost the battle to stay stern. "I thought you had me there with that last bit of shooting."

"So did I," the man said, and laughter rang out all around.

Little Jon laughed the loudest of all. "He sore wanted to save me from a sore sorry deed is what he wanted. My thanks to you, Master Bowman Stutely. 'Twas a worthy try. Now, if our places had been reversed—"

"You'd have still lost," Roland said.

"Bloody sure of himself, ain't he?" Jon quipped.

"*Will* Stutely?" Marian interrupted, bringing the fellow's gaze to her.

"Aye, m'lady. How'd ye know?"

"A lucky guess." Just another page out of her favorite legend, where a hard-nosed character by the name of Will Stutely was oft reputed to be the best archer in the band after Robin and Little Jon. She'd figured he'd be in the ranks here somewhere. She just hadn't figured to see him wearing the Gisbourne badge. How very helpful for Roland to have a pair of eyes in the enemy camp.

"Let me guess again," she said to Stutely. "You were in charge of guarding the postern gate the night of the raid."

"Aye...*ahem*...I was there for a bit, as I recall." He chuckled at the memory.

"I wondered how you broke into the fortress," she said to Roland.

"Hmm," he murmured, "if only he'd stayed at his post a little longer and kept you and Cymrica *out*."

Marian's gaze returned to Stutely. "But you weren't part of Sir Guy's raiding party in the forest." *I hope.*

"Nay, m'lady. I try to avoid doings of that sort." His expression turned serious. "If the truth be known, Sir Guy himself tries to avoid such business. 'Twas the old sheriff who drove him to evil. Nottingham used the Gisbourne forces to bolster his own."

Yeah, she'd kind of guessed that, too. But Sir Guy was still a vicious tempered brute from what she'd seen, and a cold-blooded murderer in his own right. She lowered her gaze to hide her thoughts. This was hardly the time or place to argue Sir Guy's character. Roland needed to know the truth of that night though. She had to tell him what she'd witnessed. Why did she feel so reluctant about that?

More laughter rang out. Someone had made a joke, but she'd missed the punch line.

"Oh, I see," Roland answered the jesting. "You devils were all cheering for Stutely against me. Trying to ruin my trap by stealing Robin's win, were you? A fine lot you are."

Bitting back laughter, he glanced at Marian. "My original arrangements weren't very popular with these lads, I'm afraid."

Gee, she couldn't imagine why not.

He scanned the surrounding faces. "Where's Will? The other Will—Scarlet? I saw him on the field before."

Little Jon answered. "He'd better be in those trees with Marian." He grinned. "The other Marian—Robin's mare. That's where I sent him to wait."

"Good thinking," Roland said. "Thank you."

Jon's grin soured. "Ye be welcome. One of us has to think."

"And what's that supposed to mean? I did pretty damn good back there, considering the circumstances." Roland shot a one-eyed glare about the group. "I didn't notice over many of you rushing to my aid." His eye paused on Jon. "Except for you, of course. I *knew* you'd charge in like a bull in heat, trying to take on the whole bloody company."

"Aye, and 'twas lucky for them ye stopped me," Jon said.

"We was waiting for ye to make the first move, Robin," beefy Diccon piped up.

Marian's faire-ward joined in with a loud cry. "I think we *all* better move—fast!"

In unison, everyone turned to look.

"Bleedin' saints," Diccon said. "And me without me antlers."

There came the sheriff's men running down the Nottingham road, barreling in on them from the direction opposite the field.

"Shit," Roland said, "they must have cut around the town to avoid the crowd."

Jon yanked his sword from its sheath and bellowed, "Hold yer ground! If the bastards want a fight, we'll give 'em one!"

"The hell we will. You are just aching to lop off heads today, aren't you?" Roland arm-wrestled him for possession of the blade. "Jon, those *bastards* are my men, too. I don't want *any* of us killed."

"Ye should have thought of that before ye started today's game." Glowering, Jon hung on to his hilt as Roland hung on to his wrist.

"Right. Hindsight always has eyes like a hawk, doesn't it?" Roland bit out.

Stutely tapped him on the shoulder. "Looks like your 'bastards' have help. Those are Gisbourne men behind them, and..." He squinted down the road. "Lord Stephen's, and—"

Marian's ears burned as Roland blistered the air with curses. With a final twist, he jerked the sword from Jon's hand, upended it and shoved it back into its sheath. "That settles it. Whatever Sigurd was planning, he's lost control of the show. We've got a free-for-all now. Every noble here has his men after us. They all want a piece of Robin Hood's arse."

Jon couldn't resist a chuckle. "Well, seeing as how Robin has lightened so many of their purses, I suppose we can't blame them—much."

"I'm not blaming them at all. We've no time for blame," Roland told him. "I just don't want bloodshed. And I especially don't want them near enough to recognize any of you." He waved an arm toward the front fringe of the forest. "To

Sherwood! Scatter! We'll lose them in the trees!"

Like a pack of wolves chased by an army of hares—an odd image, but that's what it felt like—the band turned its collective tail and dashed for the greenwood, spreading out as they ran.

Marian clung to Roland's hand, riding his wake as he pulled her along behind him. Every breath scorched her chest. Her heart pounded like a freight train. She just wished her feet could move as fast. Why weren't they there yet? From the crossroads the tree line had seemed only a hop, skip and a jump away, but she was all hopped out now and it didn't look any closer. It was like someone yanked the forest back with every step she took, like running on a treadmill.

Gasp. She'd never make it.

Something whizzed past her shoulder.

An arrow?

Good God. The hares had fangs.

Ahead of her, Stutely broke stride and stopped to string his bow. He grabbed the arrow from where it landed in the dirt by his feet and sent it back the way it came.

"No!" Roland shouted a second too late.

"'Tis all right," Stutely called. "I aimed o're their heads."

A loud "yeow!" sounded from behind them. Not a fatal yeow, just a noise like someone got zapped in an arm or leg.

"*Over* their heads?" Roland frowned.

Stutely shrugged. "I missed."

"Missed, hell. No more shooting!" Roland ordered.

"Tell that to them," Stutely hollered as several more missiles flew past.

All hit harmlessly in the turf.

"Are those Hunterdon arrows?" Roland muttered. "God, they're lousy shots. I need to set sterner archery practice for the men."

"They're shooting close enough for me," Marian panted out.

Too close. She stumbled and went down on her knees, almost dragging Roland with her as an arrow struck through the hem of her gown, pinning it to the earth.

Cursing a blue streak, he ripped it free and lifted her to her feet. "Is this their idea of rescuing you? Bloody hell—Stutely, give me your bow!"

Grinning, Stutely ran back, holding out the weapon. "Aim o're their heads," he suggested.

Roland's lips twisted in a snarl. "I'm aiming *for* their heads—which are stuck up their asses, the morons."

Marian suddenly realized she still held the gold arrow. Her fingers were numb from clutching it. "Wait! Use this one." She shoved it into his hand. "Aim it off to the side. Let's see how many chase it."

"Ah, teaching them to play fetch?" With a deliciously wicked laugh, Roland let fly the gold. It arced high in the air, shining like a ray of sunshine, drawing all eyes to it.

"Catch!" he yelled, and a mad scramble ensued as the hares switched target and pursued the prize. The diversion gave the wolves time to lengthen their lead. The trees loomed almost in reach, just one last sprint away, when tremors shook the ground—the thunder of galloping hooves.

"Wonderful, here comes the cavalry," Roland said.

"And we're the Indians," Marian gasped.

Little Jon raced up beside her. "She'll ne're outrun them. I'd best carry her."

"I'm perfectly capable of carrying my own wife, thank you very much." Roland snatched her away from the man's grab and swung her high against his chest.

Chuckling, Jon threw her a wink. "Touchy, ain't he?"

"Very," she said. And a grand touch it was, too. She wound her arms around his neck, hanging on tight as he sped forward.

"You're in worse danger than you realize, my lady. The moment we're clear, Robin's going to ravish his hostage," he warned.

Her insides melted. *Ravished by Robin Hood*. It had a nice ring to it.

"Promises, promises. I'm terrified," she breathed out, then screamed in earnest when a fresh volley of arrows rained down on them.

With a heavy grunt, Jon crashed to earth, a gray goose shaft quivering in his thigh.

"Bloody marvelous," Roland said. "Now I have to carry *him*." He pulled up sharply and started to swing Marian to her feet.

"Nay," a voice stopped him, "I'll lead our prize bull."

Huffing and puffing, Friar Tuck ran up, dropped to his knees by Jon's side, and took a quick gander at the wound. "'Tis not deep," he told him. "Trusteth in the Lord, my son. Your belief in His mercy shall deliver you from pain."

His hand fisted over the arrow and he yanked it out.

Jon roared.

Tuck shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "O ye of little faith." He tickled Jon's nose with the feathered end of the shaft. "See? 'Tis but a bee sting."

"Give me that!" Jon jerked it out of his hand. "If I e'r find the *bee* who shot it, I'll stick his stinger back up his arse." His gaze flicked to Marian. "I hate bugs," he said, his laugh mixing with a groan as Tuck hauled him upright. Leaning on the friar, he hopped the final few yards into the cover of the woods, the two men, big and bigger, grousing at each other the entire way.

Robin Hood dove in on their heels, Maid Marian clinging to his neck, while behind them clattered and clanked the racket of a thirty-horse pile-up. Riders slammed on the brakes to avoid hitting trees. They hit each other instead. Stallions screamed, pawing the air, dumping derrieres out of saddles and into the dust. The hares rushed in a second later, red-faced over the gold arrow incident, and got tangled in the tumble, everyone tripping over everyone else. Tempers flared. Fistfights broke out. Naughty words flew thick and fast.

The wolves peeking out at the melee from behind bramble and bush gave themselves hernias holding back hoots and howls. Shaking with silent laughter, they slipped off to safety in groups of twos and threes, melting into the greenwood like smoke on a breeze.

A great escape. A fun time was had by all.

Little Jon paused long enough for Maid Marian to rip the hem from her gown and bandage his leg. A Girl Scout she wasn't, but it would serve till he got something better. Then he, too, disappeared among the trees, happily hobbling between Friar Tuck and a sturdy little chap introduced as Mutch the Miller's Son, so short by comparison, Jon gripped his shoulder and used him like a cane. Mutch must have enjoyed that.

Marian gazed after them, soaking up the experience. The ancient oaks standing sentry about her, their leafy shadows shielding her from view. The forest floor soft and springy under her feet. The green earth smells... And Roland at her side, his arm around her, bringing everything into one perfect whole. She leaned into him, memorizing the moment, matching it against all her prior dreams. The

dreams lost by a mile. Nothing could top the reality.

"I wish we could stay here like this forever," she whispered.

"What? You're ready to run off with Robin so soon?" He turned her to face him. "I thought 'twas Roland you loved."

"It's *you* I love, every wonderful one of you, Lord Roland-Robin Hood-Orlando Demitrios Konstantinos." Smiling, she slipped her arms around his neck and drew his head down to hers. "I'm just hoping we have a lot of boys, so we can name them all after you."

"Hey, hold on..." He stopped her in mid-pucker. His uncovered eye squeezed shut with the strain of a mental search, then popped open again. "You stole that from the movie *Charade*. Didn't Audrey Hepburn say something like that to Cary Grant at the end?"

"So what? Films haven't been invented yet. That movie won't be made for centuries. Which means *I* said it first. They stole it from me."

"How about that? You're right. Mmm..." His lips brushed hers.

"Mmm, yourself." She returned the feather-light kiss, then slid her hands to his shoulders and rested her head on his chest. A sudden thought gave her pause. "What are you going to do about Sigurd?"

"I've no idea. It depends on what *he* was planning to do with me. And why. Whatever's going on, there's not much he can do openly to Lord Roland. I'll deal with him tonight at the manor, after I've ditched Robin for the day." His arms gathered her close, unwilling to break the hug. Unwilling, too, probably to face what lay ahead—confronting the treason of a trusted advisor.

Marian sighed into his neck, all her own trust in him now, believing he could handle the situation if he said he could, but hating that he was being forced to. "I guess we'd better get going then. It sounds like the three-hundred stooges back there are beginning to sort themselves out. Will any of them start searching for us?"

"Possibly. A few of the braver ones maybe." His chuckle rumbled against her ear. "I just need to find Scarlet and my horse first. With all the excitement, I forgot to ask Jon where, exactly, he told him to wait for me."

Oh, right. She'd almost forgotten about Will, too. She pulled out of the embrace and glanced around.

Roland cocked his head, listening. Brush crackled nearby.

"I hope that's him," he said.

Marian sniffed. "Well, it smells like a horse."

Roland's gaze went wary. "No, it doesn't. It smells like a pig."

His gaze shot upward, raking over the branches above. In a flash, he seized her about the waist and hoisted her high. "Grab on!"

She grabbed, sudden alarm clenching her fingers, then pulled as he boosted, and scrambled her way onto a thick leafy limb. He jumped, catching the same bough, and swung up beside her with the grace of an acrobat. Together they peered down through the greenery as Sir Guy crunched into view, his faire-day finery in soiled shreds from the ruckus on the road, black murder in his eye...and something else. Fear? Desperation?

He picked his way carefully, his glance darting from side to side, searching the shadows. A seasoned hunter stalking a dangerous prey, but not happy about it. He looked like he thought he might become the quarry himself at any instant.

"I have to give the swine credit," Roland whispered. "He's got balls to come after me alone."

Yup. Just like in the story where Sir Guy of Gisbourne went on a solo robbing safari disguised in the skin of a horse. Or in this case, simply smelling like

one. He'd wanted the bounty on Robin Hood's head. The legendary Gisbourne was reputed to be an ace warrior, but a man whose wild living had sunk him heavily in debt. What a coincidence. 'Twas said he'd do anything for money. Marian didn't doubt it for a minute.

She huddled against Roland. "You didn't offer a reward for Robin's capture, did you?"

"God no, I'm not *that* stupid. There'd be no need even if I wished to. Half the barons in the area have already offered one. The man who brings in Robin Hood could make a real *killing*. Pun intended."

"I'm not laughing."

The whispering broke off as Sir Guy halted directly beneath their tree. Marian held her breath as he crouched to examine the ground. Whatever signs he saw there brought his gaze up through the branches and straight into hers.

Her voice snagged in her throat.

Roland's didn't.

"Looking for someone?" He leapt out feet first, landing on Sir Guy's head heels down.

Both men tumbled to the earth. Roland rolled forward in a smooth somersault and bounced upright, his legs firmly beneath him, ready for battle.

There was none to be had. Sir Guy lay like a broken pretzel where he'd dropped, breathing, but out like a light.

"Pleasant dreams." Roland poised thoughtfully a moment, studying the twisted figure, then made a few adjustments and grinned up at Marian who sat clutching her tree limb with a death grip. "There, that's better, don't you think? He'd have got a crick in his neck lying the other way."

"He looks lovely," she choked out. Sir Guy now lay neatly on his back, holding a bouquet of forest flowers and ferns. "The floral arrangement is a nice touch."

Trembling like the leaves around her, she half jumped, half fell out of the tree.

"Easy, sweetheart, we're nearly home free." Roland caught her and lowered her to her feet.

She sank deep into his hug, burying herself in the solid feel of him while she wove her wits back together. She'd expected blood—a lot of it—expected to see Sir Guy dead and Robin Hood wounded like it happened in the legend. For the first time in her life she was really, *really* sick of those legends.

Drawing a breath to steady herself, she gave him a final squeeze and stepped away. "Right. I don't know about you, Robin, but I think Maid Marian has had all the fun she can stand for one day." She smiled at him. "Let's go, lover."

"In a minute." He pulled her back into the embrace. "Call me lover like that and you'll have to give Robin a kiss first."

"Really, sir, Maid Marian has married the Sheriff of Nottingham. Or hadn't you heard?" She pouted, knowing it would push him over the edge. "I can't go around kissing other men in the woods. What would my husband say?"

"I won't tell him if you won't." One arm hardened around her waist as his free hand gripped her chin, steering her mouth to his. "Just one kiss. For luck."

"Make it a good one. 'Twill be your last, *devil*."

The kiss froze, lips barely touching, two bodies going rigid against each other. They'd never heard the intruder approach. He must have moved in under cover of the noise when Roland toppled Sir Guy and been there waiting behind the trees. Waiting to pounce.

Marian's heart plummeted straight to her feet.

"*Sigurd*." Roland's breath hissed out like steam on her face. His arm contracted and the ground flew out from under her as he heaved her away and spun to meet the man's charge.

She landed, stunned, on top of Sir Guy, squashing his bouquet and pushing a groggy "ugh" out of him. The grunt collided with the clash of metal as Roland's dagger stopped a sword thrust.

"Devil!" Sigurd lunged again, his mouth twisted, his eyes manic, his blade swinging for Roland's neck.

The dagger flashed up, turning the strike aside.

Marian bit back a cry and rolled off Sir Guy onto her knees. He groaned and struggled up on an elbow, staring through unfocused eyes before collapsing once more with a thud. The movement drew Sigurd's glare to him, then back to Roland.

"If you were a true Hunterdon, you'd have finished him," the steward snarled out.

"I am a true Hunterdon." Roland parried a forward jab. "As true as any who was born to it. I've been true to the earldom and true to you." He ducked to avoid a swipe at his head and snatched up a fallen branch, then moved backward under a rapid rain of blows, returning none of them, doing nothing but blocking cuts with dagger and wood. Heavy defense without an ounce of attack.

"Nay!" Breathing hard from fury as much as exertion, Sigurd slowed the assault. His swordplay turned crafty, his offense focused on penetrating Roland's guard. "You're true to the evil you came from. I've watched your wickedness grow. You haunt the woods with demons. You challenge righteous law and give away Hunterdon wealth to poor scum with nay claim to it. You'd bring down the whole house if I let you!"

Tears wet his cheeks as he lashed out. "I loved you once. I thought you the answer to a prayer. When the old Lord Roland died with naught but a baby girl to follow him, I knelt by his body and begged the Blessed Virgin to send me a new earl to save the Hunterdons.

"And you appeared on the road, looking enough like him to be his son. I thought then you *were* his son, little Roland that he had by his first wife in France. You were the right age. You had the right name. Orlando... Roland... 'tis the same. 'Twas said she and the babe died there in childbed. But when I saw you, I knew it must be a lie—or that the saints had sent the boy back to us. I took you home and put it about that Lord Roland's son was alive. 'Twas the truth, I thought. A miracle. I believed you'd come straight from Heaven to preserve our lands. Now I knoweth you were sent by Hell to destroy us!" With a battery of blows he drove his quarry back against a tree.

Frantically, Marian glanced about for a weapon. The man was mad. The wood-devils had played their part too well. Sigurd with his superstitious mind thought they were real. It figured, if he'd witnessed the "miracle" of Orlando's second time-jump. The boy had appeared magically. By medieval logic, if he hadn't come from God, he must be from the devil.

A club, I need a club. If she could just get her legs under her and working, maybe she could knock him out from behind. Dizzy but determined, she grappled to her feet.

A silent scream clogged her throat as a hand gripped her wrist, dragging her back to her knees, and she looked down into Sir Guy's glazed eyes. He hung on when she tried to jerk free. With effort he raised his head to observe the clash of thrusts and parries. His fogged brain struggled to comprehend.

“That’s Hunterdon? Hah. Methought him a coward.” His grip on her hardened when Roland barely blocked a fatal strike. “He’d have been better off with me. I’ve sins enough on my soul to want nay more. I’d have taken him alive if I could. Sir Sigurd will not stop till his sword drinks blood.”

“Aye!” Sigurd turned at the words and lunged for them. “And I’ll whet its appetite now with yours, Gisbourne swine!”

“No!” Without thinking, Marian flung herself over Sir Guy as a shield, but there was a lot of him and only so much of her. Sigurd’s blade sliced in under her arm, and Gisbourne blood pooled up warm and sticky, soaking the front of her gown. Sir Guy’s grip on her dropped away. His voice rasped hoarsely in her ear.

“You tried to save me. Why?”

She had no answer, and no voice in her to speak it with even if she had. In numb shock she pulled off him just in time to see Roland swinging his branch at Sigurd’s skull.

Like he had eyes in the back of his head, the steward turned at the last instant and struck out with his sword. Wood splintered with a crack just above Roland’s fingers. Another inch and his hand would have flown free with the branch.

“Fool.” Sigurd spat on the ground in disgust. “Have I taught you so poorly? You should have thrown your knife whilst you had the chance.”

“I didn’t want to kill you.” Roland ripped off his eye-patch to meet the man’s glare full on. His own gaze shone dark and desperate, hurting. “Sigurd, you’ve helped make me what I am. I *can’t* kill you.”

“Mayhap not. But if you’d stop me, you’d best try. Naught but death will end this now—be it yours or mine. If I made you, I’ll *unmake* you.”

In the blink of an eye, Sigurd reached down and yanked Sir Guy’s sword from its sheath. He tossed it forward, hilt first. “Fight me, devil!”

Roland grabbed the weapon out of the air and threw it aside. He hurled his dagger after it. “No. If you want my life, old man, you’ll have to take it by murder. I’ll not fight you. I can’t.”

Slowly, deliberately, he opened wide his arms, spreading them out like the wings of a bird, exposing his chest for whatever Sigurd might do. He had to. Sigurd was a superior warrior, but so was his prize pupil. And Roland was younger by decades and half a head taller. If it came down to a genuine trading of blows, there’d be no contest. Roland was almost sure to be the victor. He knew that.

So did Marian. He couldn’t risk fighting Sigurd. He’d never be able to live with himself if he killed him. He was betting his own life that Sir Sigurd’s code of chivalry as a knight would keep him from attacking an unarmed man. She knew all that even as fear froze the marrow in her bones and her heart shriveled to the size of a pea, cold and compacted and pulsing with pain. A black hole inside her. An agony that would never go away if he’d bet wrong. If she lost him.

His eyes met hers, one quick poignant glance asking understanding for what he did, forgiveness for the chance he took. She gave both. She’d never loved him more than this moment when he put honor above all else.

She fastened her gaze on his face, drinking in the sight of him while the rough hiss of Sigurd’s breathing filled her ears—angry and torn, a fight after all, a battle of wills. Sigurd fought it with himself. Marian didn’t dare look at him. She kept her eyes on Roland, as Roland stared steadily at his steward. Then suddenly, a different hiss—metallic—the scrape of a sword returning to its sheath. With the sound, Marian’s tension burst open like a dam breaking, flooding her with relief.

“So be it.” Sigurd’s booted feet crunched through the mulch. His broad back eclipsed Roland from view. A hand stretched high, glinting in the shadows...

And relief capsized into horror. Marian drowned in her own strangled scream as the knife in the hand arced down.

"I gave you your chance," the old man bit out. "If you'd rather die like a dog, I'll butcher you like one—"

He pitched forward, another knife sticking out the back of his neck. He'd wanted a death. He got one. His.

Dumbstruck, Roland caught him. Squeezing his eyes shut, biting his lip, he hugged the body to his chest, holding back a sob. Holding on to the man who'd given him this life and then tried to take it away. A very big, very bitter pill to swallow.

Marian saw him choking on it and her heart cracked straight down the middle. She found her legs and stumbled to his side. Together they lowered Sigurd's shell to the soft forest floor.

Roland gazed down a heavy moment into the man's lifeless eyes before reaching out and closing them. "I didn't think he'd do it."

"I knew he would. He struck me when I was down, without e're offering me chance to yield," a strained voice said. "He had a battle fever on him. 'Tis the curse of the Hunterdons, that temper." Sir Guy sat swaying from the effort of hauling upright to throw his knife. "'Tis been the curse of the Gisbournes as well. The families are more alike than we care to admit."

He tried to laugh. It came out a groan and he fell backward, his breathing a ragged gurgle as fluid filled his lungs.

Marian's eyes met Roland's and they both ran to Sir Guy. She sat and eased his head onto her lap. Roland started tearing open the man's shirt to examine the wound.

"Nay." Sir Guy waved him off. "There be naught you can do. I'm for Hell now, I'll wager. 'Tis a pity I cannot lay odds on that. 'Twould be one bet I'd win." He managed a laugh then, coughing up blood with it.

"Don't be too certain of that, Sir Guy." Marian mopped the red off his mouth and chin with a handful of her skirt, seeing him through a haze of tears, seeing another face with his in her mind's eye. Her uncle's. She'd hated both men, and with good reason. But hate itself was a bad thing. It hurt the giver more than the receiver. It sat in you like a beast, gnawing you from the inside out. It made you sick and weak, whereas love brought healing and strength. She wanted nothing but love in her life from now on. She looked at Roland and knew she had it.

Her eyes found Sir Guy's again. "You saved my husband. I can forgive you everything for that." With the words, she forgave Uncle Ted also, for the sake of closure if nothing else. She smoothed back the hair from Sir Guy's damp brow. "And if one small human can forgive you, I'm sure a very big God will, too."

The wisp of a grin touched his lips. "I was wrong, my lady. You're nay witch. You're an angel." His gaze shifted to Roland and the grin widened a fraction. "And you're still a devil, Hunterdon. I'd not like for you to think I did what I did for your sake."

"Perish the thought." Roland returned the grin, but it ended at his mouth. Tears and tragedy misted his eyes.

Marian ached to wrap him in her arms, but Sir Guy lay like lead against her, shivering as the warmth flowed out of him with his blood.

"'Tis cold," he said. "I can nay more feel my legs."

She leaned over him, trying to block the forest drafts. Roland ripped off his outer tunic and tucked it around the man. His hands covered Marian's in the act and he left them there, holding her along with Sir Guy, the three of them frozen together

in a strange tableau, waiting at the doors of death.

Sir Guy battled to pull in air and push out speech. "'Twasn't for my sake, either, I did it. 'Twas for your lady. She tried to save my life, even after I tried to take hers." He gazed up at them, his eyes already clouded with oblivion. "I know I've gathered debts aplenty. I wanted to pay just one before I died."

A shudder racked through him and he stiffened in their hold. A grimace twisted his features. Then like the downward flutter of a leaf, his eyes drifted shut and peace fell on his face. And the whole of him went quiet and limp.

Chapter 19

They had to leave the bodies where they lay.

"No doubt the sheriff will send out a search party for the missing as soon as he's home," Roland said. Bitter irony soured his tone.

Marian tightened her grip on his hand as they followed a path through the trees, looking for Will and the mare. What a roller coaster of a day, full of ups and downs. Some amazing highs and a couple of deadly lows.

Twigs crackled and snapped under her feet while the man beside her moved silently as a ghost, and looked pale as one. He blamed himself for both deaths—wrongly, but he wouldn't be half the man he was if he didn't feel responsible. That the casualty count could have been so much higher was small comfort. He blamed himself for the entire near-fiasco on the archery field, too. And he was tortured by losing Sigurd. He thought he might have been able to reason with the old man eventually, but there'd be no chance of that now. There'd have been no chance if Sigurd had killed him either, but he wasn't looking at it that way. A wretched combination, guilt and grief.

"It *wasn't* your fault," she said yet again. She felt like a broken record repeating it over and over. "How could anyone have possibly guessed the day would end like this?"

Roland shook his head. "I should have suspected something was wrong when Sigurd seemed to go senile overnight. I realize now he was just playing the fool so he could watch me closer—to throw me off guard."

"That's what I thought, too, but I've been rethinking it." Just in the last few minutes, actually, while searching for something to ease his mind. "I'm wondering now if all of it really was an act. He might not have been senile in the ordinary sense, but he could have been in the early stages of Alzheimer's. That can make for some nasty mood swings and erratic behavior, from what I've heard. And you wouldn't know what was going on unless it was diagnosed. I don't think there'd be any way of diagnosing it in this time. It's an awful disease. And it's fatal."

"Meaning that if Sigurd had it, he'd have died anyway, and worse than he did today? I'm sorry, sweetheart, but that hardly makes me feel any better."

"I understand. But it also means that there was no way you could have seen what was coming. And if he wasn't in his right mind, you couldn't have reasoned with him under any circumstances."

"Maybe not. I didn't have to give him such a perfect set-up to come after me though. I didn't have to play Robin Hood in the first place." He put his foot down deliberately on a fallen branch, cracking it with a sound like a popgun.

Okay, now they were cutting to the bones of the matter. She dug in her heels and pulled them both to a halt. "Are you telling me you regret the good you've done? I assume you *have* been doing good. I heard how Bess's grandkids spoke of you yesterday. I saw how the crowd treated you today. You and your devils have obviously made a very positive difference in a lot of people's lives. One bad experience can't take away all that good, can it?"

"No, but it's sure taken the fun out of the game." He stared off into the trees, his eyes misted by the past. "It *was* a game once. I began it not long after I came to the manor. How could I resist? I was an active kid who'd grown up fighting and stealing to survive, and suddenly here I was in the thick of famous Sherwood, learning all sorts of cool stuff like how to use a sword and shoot arrows. All I needed was Robin Hood to complete the picture. But no one seemed to know who

he was when I asked. I couldn't understand it. I figured he had to be here somewhere. I'd met him, right?" He gave a weak laugh. "Finally, I decided I must have hallucinated that meeting. I...*ahem*...suppose you've noticed that the time-jump disorients you. You're not sure what you've seen and what you haven't for a while."

No kidding. Um, yeah, she knew what he meant. Very funny.

"But if there wasn't a real Robin Hood, I figured that gave me leave to play him myself. Hell, I already had a Little Jon. I had the forest. I had a bow and I was starting to get pretty good with it. The idea was just too tempting to pass up. I told Jon the Robin Hood story. Well, actually I told him about Errol Flynn. He thought I made it up, but he liked the idea, too.

"We used to sneak off to the woods whenever we could with some of the other boys from the manor. We never told anyone else. Keeping it secret was part of the sport. We'd all skulk about the trees, shooting at imaginary foe, losing our arrows in the brush...playing our own stupid version of Robin and his Merrie Men. I always got to be Robin, naturally, because I was the earl." A dry chuckle rolled out with the memory, then turned to a sigh.

"Somewhere along the line we stopped being boys and the game turned real. A lot of the men we helped in the early days ended up joining us. The band grew. The whole thing just snowballed. I'm still not sure how." He shrugged, lifting his hands palms up, hoping an answer would drop into them perhaps.

Marian gave him one. "I know how. Because you're not the kind of man who can sit down to a feast while others go hungry around you. Lord Roland would have wanted to help, but he could only do so much. An earl is bound by the law and his responsibilities to his own household. But Orlando always made his own laws, didn't he?"

"Orlando had to, to feed himself."

"Not just himself. I remember watching you through the bookstore window one day. You stole a hotdog from a street stand, then turned around and gave it to a sorry old man camped out on a steam vent. You've always been Robin Hood." She reached for his hands.

He met her halfway, linking his fingers with hers. "But what if I feel it's time to stop now?"

"You're serious?" She wasn't sure what to think. Holding his gaze along with his hands, she searched his eyes.

He meant it.

No more Robin Hood.

Around them the forest went on about its business with leafy whisperings and feathered things chirping as the late afternoon sunlight filtered down through a cathedral ceiling of interlaced green boughs. Undergrowth rustled with the scurry of tiny furry feet, and insects hummed in the herb-scented air. Life everywhere. Marian stood facing him in the center of it all, Sir Guy's blood drying stiff on her gown, its odor mixing with the fragrance of the woods, a poignant reminder of how temporary life was for all its abundance.

A sad thought? No. That death always had the last word just made living all the more precious. If the stay here was short, then appreciate every blessed moment of it. Waste not a minute in worry or regret. The tragedy wasn't that people died. It was that so many of them didn't know how to live. She'd been one of those many, but no longer. Something had pulled her out of a walking death and full into Life. Roland. He'd done it by loving who and what she was, unconditionally. How could she do any less for him?

She smiled. "Well, I can't say I won't miss 'Superman,' but I always thought 'Clark Kent' was pretty super, too. Whatever you decide is all right with me, lover, you know that. Robin Hood was the thief, but Lord Roland is the one who stole my heart."

"Lord Roland is a very lucky man." He let go of her hands to pull her into an embrace. "'Twill be for the best, sweetheart. I'm not ending the game out of sorrow over today, I promise. I'm just thinking that things have grown too big for one man to handle. I can only manage so many jobs. I have the manor to see to and the sheriff's position on top of it now. That's a lot of land and people to administer. Besides, with me as sheriff there's less need for the wood-devils. Much of what we did was 'damage control' on the former sheriff's activities. *He* was the real devil."

The muscles in his arms hardened as he pulled her closer. "And there's another reason. I have a wife now. I'm not so keen on running around in a hood at night as I once was. I'm hoping to have *other* things to do with my nights from here on in."

"Good point. I hadn't thought of it that way." And now that she had, liquid warmth flowed through her, fluttering her pulse. Oblivious to all else she wrapped her arms around his waist and burrowed into the hug.

A soft snort sounded behind her and horsy breath feathered her hair. With a low chuckle Roland released her to reach out and pet the velvety nose pushing at her shoulder.

"I think she's jealous," he said.

"No, she's not." Grinning, Marian swiveled about and faced her namesake, who pawed the path with a hoof muffled in rags. "We got along great before. Didn't we, Marian?"

The mare bobbed her head and nickered. Presumably, that meant she agreed.

"Good girl," Marian told her, and glanced at Roland. "I never even heard her. She moves quietly, doesn't she?"

"She's been trained to. I heard her a moment before she showed up. She must have heard us first and come looking for me." He stepped around her to take hold of the bridle. "What I'm wondering is where Scarlet is. Either she gave him the slip, or something's happened to him."

"Oh God, I hope not."

"Don't worry. She most likely just ran away. She's good at that if she senses me near." He stroked the mare's sleek neck as she coyly batted her beautiful brown eyes at him. "She seems not overly concerned. If there was a problem, she'd let me know."

"You don't look totally sure of that."

"I'm mostly sure, but after today, sweetheart, I take nothing for granted." With a quick leap, he landed in the saddle.

Quite a difference from Lord Roland's comical mounting a couple of days prior. She waited for him to pull her up with him.

He pulled the mare's head around instead, facing her back up the path the way she'd come. "Stay here. I'll return for you once I've checked out things ahead."

Marian's eyes widened. The blue eyes, not the brown. In the first place, she wasn't at all comfortable with the idea of being left alone while he might be riding into an ambush. And secondly... Oh, screw secondly. The first reason was enough.

"Hey, wait a minute!" She called him to a stop. "What if I don't want to stay here? Wouldn't it be safer to stick together?"

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, *I* think so."

“Sorry, sweetheart, I don’t recall making this an open debate. You’re staying here like I told you.”

Like he told her. Uh-huh. That was the second reason. She really hated it when he turned autocrat on her.

“I’ll be back for you soon,” he said as he trotted down the path.

Sooner than he thought.

“Marian, stop!” she yelled.

In rapid succession came a whinny, a curse, and a thud, and her equine counterpart skidded to a halt before her. Roland made it back a minute later on his own legs, after picking himself up off the path where the mare had dumped him.

Both Marians batted their eyes at him.

“I told you we get along great. That makes it two to one. You’ve been outvoted, lover boy,” the one in the gown said. The one wearing the saddle nickered agreement.

Roland sighed and lifted the first onto the back of the second, then jumped up behind her. “You’re lucky I love you so much, you know that? ’Tis the only thing that keeps me from wringing your neck sometimes. Wench.”

The mare snorted.

“Ditto to you,” he told her.

Marian (the one in his arms) craned her head around to smooch him on the cheek. “I love you, too.”

He turned his face and caught her lips with his.

Mmm... She twisted in the saddle and pressed into him, clutching his shoulders, opening her mouth to the kiss—hot and wet and hungry, suddenly ravenous, a contest to see who could devour the other the fastest. The reins dropped loose on the mare’s neck and she moved forward without either of her riders noticing. When they surfaced for air they were dozens of paces down the path, with heavy moans and pants echoing in their ears. The sounds of two bodies locked together in lovemaking. Not their bodies, unfortunately.

Roland’s expression went black. “Bastard. He’s betrothed to *my* sister and he’s hiding here humping another wench in the bushes.”

Um...that was one way of putting it. Of course, the girl wasn’t really his sister, but she looked like it, through that Byzantine grandmother of hers, and she’d been raised as such. She’d been only an infant when Orlando became Roland. He’d probably been as much a father to her as a brother. Small wonder if he felt protective. Marian understood that. The tricky part was whether or not she should mention what else she understood.

“Let’s go. I’ll deal with him later.” Utterly grim, Roland gathered up the reins and urged the mare onward. “Little sister can scream all she wants, but the wedding is off. I’ll not have her marrying someone who shows so little regard for her. She has no idea what she’d be getting with a husband like that.”

“Oh, I think she does.” *She must know exactly what she’s getting by now.*

A female cry of ecstasy rattled the woods. Unmistakable. The girl had great lungs, didn’t she?

“*Cymrica*. I should have known.” Roland reined up short.

Marian bumped against him with the impact. “She ran after Will when he left the platform. I, um...guess she found him.”

“No shit.” He started to pull the mare’s head around. “I’ll break his knees.”

She grabbed his hands. “No, you won’t.”

“Sweetheart, I can’t allow this. She’s not married to him yet!”

“Well, she will be soon. When did you become such a prude? We did it before we were married.”

“That was different. You accosted me. I was powerless to defend myself.”

“Ha-ha. You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?”

“How can I? ’Twas one of the highlights of my life. I’ve already begun an epic verse about it.”

“You write poetry?” she angled around to look at him.

He blushed. “*Ahem*...yes. Not very good poetry, I’m afraid, but I keep trying. Poetry, essays... I’m better with the prose. I’ve been writing a book actually—sort of a journal. Just the mad ramblings of a thirteenth century earl from North Philly. It helps me stay grounded to put my thoughts on parchment. It all looks so much saner in Latin.”

With something between a chuckle and a sigh, he pulled her more squarely against himself in the saddle and let the mare continue on her way. “All right. We’ll leave them to it. Far be from me to stand in the way of love.”

“You *are* love.” She leaned back, feeling his love wrap round her with his arm, wondering at the mystery that brought them together. Not just one leap through time, but two. The impossible twice over, too much for a fluke of fate.

There had to be something deliberate behind it, but what? Maybe they didn’t need to know how it happened. Most likely they never would. She wanted to know, just the same. She wanted to know who or what power to thank for the miracle.

Noontime the next day found her wanting only to get out of the manor’s main kitchen before the chief cook had a stroke. The poor man looked ready to choke on his own bile. Marian hardly blamed him. She’d invaded his space. Ladies weren’t supposed to cook. She’d just been proving that point for him with a vengeance by doing perfectly awful things to otherwise good food. Oh well. He’d get over it. Eventually.

She laid a clean cloth over the plate she’d filled, grabbed it up and made a beeline for the uppermost floor of the house, gaining many a shocked stare along the way. Ladies weren’t supposed to serve food either. Quite an upstart their new mistress, wasn’t she?

Get used to it, people.

The door to Roland’s study stood ajar. She peeked in, smiling. Inside the small chamber he sat hunched over his desk, scratching away with a quill. Something brassy glinted near him on the polished wood surface of the desk. He kept glancing at it as he wrote. Suddenly his nose twitched. He straightened and turned, tracing the aroma, and his gaze landed like a bird of prey on the plate she held out to him through the door.

“That can’t possibly be what it smells like. Marian, what *have* you been doing?”

“Annoying the hell out of your cook.” With a flourish, she whipped the cloth off the dish. “Ta-da! History’s first Philadelphia Cheese Steak. I just invented it.”

Awed wonder glazed his eyes. “And *potato chips*?”

“Um, not exactly. Potatoes won’t be available here for centuries. I used turnips.”

“Turnip chips?” Laughing, he reached for her. The plate hit the desk with a clatter and Marian hit his lap to be pulled into a tight hug and a long, luscious kiss.

“Delicious,” he said when their lips parted.

“Don’t say that till you’ve tried them. I might not have recreated things as well as I hoped.”

“I wasn’t talking about the food.”

She ducked as his mouth dove in for a second helping of hers. “Sweetie, your lunch is getting cold.”

“Oh. Right.” Looking torn between the twin delicacies of cheese steak and wife, he loosened his hold and let her slip to her feet. She stood behind him, resting her hands on his shoulders while he demolished the contents of the plate.

“Mmm, almost as good as you,” he said between mouthfuls. “You want some?”

“No, thanks. I had one of the earlier versions down in the kitchen. It took me a few tries to get the hang of medieval cooking. Quite a change from my electric fry pan.”

“I can imagine.” With a chuckle and the skid of metal on wood, the empty plate got pushed aside. The skid of slippers on floor followed as Marian got pulled around the chair and back onto his lap. “Thank you for the most satisfying meal I’ve had in years.”

She smiled into his eyes. “Glad you liked it.”

“I *loved* it,” he whispered, all sorts of extra meaning in the words. “Now, what’s for dessert?”

“Find me some ice and rock salt, and I’ll invent ice cream.”

His hand stroked up her back as his eyes held hers. “I was thinking of something... warmer.”

“You would.” She tried to sound indignant. Missed it by a mile. “You’re absolutely insatiable.”

“I can’t help it. ’Tis all that hot Mediterranean blood in my veins. Blame my Greek-Italian heritage. Or maybe we should thank it for giving me a look that matched the Black Rose’s side of the Hunterdons. They might not have kept me otherwise. Yes, they needed an earl, and I was ripe for the picking, but my so-called family resemblance sealed the deal.” He paused in mid-stroke, suddenly thoughtful. “Speaking of which, I know how I managed to fit in, but I’ve been wondering why you look so like Elaine. It seems a bit much for a coincidence.”

“It is too much. I’d been wondering the same thing, but the answer popped up after she married Allan and they went to Wales. Of course, we’ll never know for sure, but I’m guessing that in my case, it’s a genuine family resemblance.”

His gaze narrowed. “What are you saying?”

“That maybe I’m her descendant. Think about it. What was my last name? Allanson. Which probably meant ‘Allan’s Son’ originally. I never knew my own heritage exactly, but it’s as likely Welsh as anything else. My family came from somewhere in the British Isles, I know that much.”

“Do you realize what that means? The old sheriff may have been more right than he knew. You’re not Elaine’s sister, but still related—her great-granddaughter, twenty times over or so.”

He let out a laugh of pure irony, which ended on a sudden choke. “God... It also means that if we hadn’t saved her and Allan you might never have been born.”

Marian jerked upright on his lap. “Oh no, let’s not even go there. I’ve seen too many sci-fi stories where people travel back in time and rescue someone only to discover the person was one of their ancestors. That plot has been done to death.”

Besides, the thought made her skin crawl.

“Sorry, I guess I was just trying to find some reason for why this all happened.” He shot her a sheepish look, that devil’s grin teasing his lips, teasing

her. Irresistible.

She relaxed and returned the grin. “Maybe *love* is the only reason we need.”

“That’s a good reason. Now can I have dessert?”

“Later. It’s early afternoon, lover, and I assume you have work to do, which I’ve already interrupted long enough.”

“The hell with work. Making love to you is my main job from now on.”

He pulled her back when she started to slide to her feet. Hands grappled, his taking liberties, hers trying to restore order.

“Roland, I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Sweetie, there are people everywhere. We live in Grand Central Station.”

“So? I do have a lock on this door. We’ll hang out a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign.”

“Hey, c’mon, the room’s too small for this.”

“All the better to keep us close.”

“I’ll tell Godgifu on you—”

In the scuffle the desk got jostled, a stack of parchment shuffled over, and something bounced up and landed back down with a sharp *ping*.

“There. Now see what you’ve done?” Struggling to look stern—an impossible feat while laughing—Marian pried his hand off her breast and twisted around, trying to see what the damage was. “It would serve you right if that’s an inkwell we knocked over.”

“Nope. ’Twas only this.” He picked it off the desk and showed her.

“Bess’s good luck charm.” A weird chill crept over her as she took it from his hand.

“Bess was a bit off on that, actually. ’Tis a *love* charm. Turn it over. There’s a Latin verse engraved on the back—some kind of incantation, I think. It seems to be a spell for removing any obstacles that are keeping star-crossed lovers apart. A pretty piece of poetry, if nothing else.” To illustrate, he recited the first few lines. “I was just copying it into my journal—for posterity. Who knows? Someone may get some use out of it someday.”

He chuckled at the joke.

Marian didn’t. “I think someone already has.”

I also think I’m going to faint. Dizziness swamped her as she stared at the inscription, hearing in her mind the Latin lines he’d just spoken—hearing another voice say them, not Roland’s.

“Where is your journal? May I see it?”

“Why not? Right there in front of you, love.” He reached around her to tidy the stack of parchment knocked askew in their tussle. “Look all you like.”

She only needed a glance; it had been less than a week since she’d last seen it, after all. Of course, it had been yellowed with age then, frail as butterfly wings. It lay on his desk, young and fresh now, looking totally innocent of the power it contained.

Her hand shook as she placed the charm beside it. Her voice shook, too. “Whatever that thing is, it works.”

“It... Sweetheart, since when have you been superstitious?”

“I’m not. I just know there’s real magic in that verse.” Feeling limp as a wet noodle, she sank against him. “The day before we got bumped back here, Mr. Mueller bought a thirteenth century manuscript at auction.” She pointed to the one in front of them. “That manuscript.”

“*Mine?* Are you sure?”

“Yes. He was very excited about it. ‘An extremely rare find,’ he told me, by some obscure scholar—”

“Wait a minute... *Obscure*? I’m going down in history as ‘some obscure scholar’?”

“Roland, you’re going down in history as Robin Hood. That ought to be enough for any man.”

“But people won’t even be sure Robin Hood existed. You told me so yourself.”

“That’s just because the researchers will be looking for someone called ‘Robert Hood,’ instead of ‘Roland of Hunterdon.’ When you lead a double-life, dear, you have to expect little mix-ups like that.”

“Ah, yes. Of course. Thank you for setting me straight.”

“Anytime.” Her eyes flashed into his. “You’re a nut, you know that?”

“Hey, babe, I’m not the one who’s talking about magic.”

“Stop laughing. I haven’t got to the important part yet.”

“Which is?”

She drew a deep breath. “Mr. Mueller was in his office reading aloud from your manuscript right before you and I made the time-jump together. I heard him through the door. He was reading that exact verse. It really is a spell.”

“Uh-huh. And you think that’s what sent us back here?”

“Do you have a better explanation?”

Silence settled over them like a cloud, nothing but the sound of their breathing and the rustle of their clothes as his arms circled her and she pressed in close. Two bodies hanging on to each other while two minds labored to understand.

“No,” he finally said. “It’s just damn strange to consider is all. From the wording of that spell, it’s meant to bring together people who are already in love but kept apart by circumstances beyond their control. I know I loved you even then, but I doubt you could have been in love with a twelve-year-old.”

“Well, I did love you in a way, but not *that* way, no. I was in love with Robin Hood. If you think you had problems loving someone thirteen years older than you, imagine how I felt loving a man who had eight centuries on me. Talk about an age gap.”

“Besides which, you thought he’d never lived in the first place.”

“Yeah, that was kind of a stumbling block, too.” She flattened her hand on his chest, letting his heart beat into her palm. A good, sound rhythm. Solid, real.

“I was in love with a dream,” she said. “And that’s the strangest thing of all...because who I was dreaming of was you.” Her hand fisted in the fabric of his shirt. “What I’m wondering now is whether those dreams were premonitions of what was to come, or...” She pulled back slightly to look him in the eye. “Were they memories of the past?”

“A bit of both maybe?” His arms hardened around her, pulling her back against him, holding her steady like a rock.

“Good answer.” She cuddled into him, past, present, and future right there in her grasp. All him. All hers. Theirs. All the walls finally down. Whatever happened now they could face it together, free and clear. The spell might have opened the door for them, but their love carried them through it to the other side. If it could do that, it would carry them through anything. Everything. That was the real magic. Love. The strongest spell of all.

“Hey, you know what I just thought?” Roland said suddenly.

“What?”

"I'm thinking that Mr. Mueller will be wondering where we've disappeared to when he comes out of his office and finds us gone. I wish I could warn him about that jerk in the leather jacket, too."

"Geeze, you're right. He could be in danger, couldn't he? At the very least, he'll be worried about us. It's pretty nasty to leave him in the lurch like that. He's such a nice old man... or he will be." She thought a moment. "I've got it. Let's write him a letter, explaining what happened. And we should thank him for it, too, while we're at it."

"A letter?" He choked on a chuckle. "And how are we supposed to send it?"

"That's obvious, isn't it?" She lifted her head off his shoulder to grin at him. Her gaze slanted from his to the desk and back again. "All you have to do is write it in your journal. We know he'll be seeing that."

His jaw dropped, then snapped shut as a sparkle lit his eyes. "Sweetheart, you're brilliant."

"I know. I was smart enough to fall in love with you, wasn't I?"

"Which also shows you have excellent taste." Without warning, his mouth swooped in, capturing hers. "Mmm, yes," he murmured against her, "you do taste excellent."

"Roland—" She twisted her face aside. "The letter?"

"We'll write it today, I promise." He snaked his hand up her spine to cup the back of her head, returning her lips to his. "Right after I hang out the 'Do Not Disturb' sign and finish my dessert."

Epilogue

Dear Mr. Mueller – Here's hoping this finds you well. We hope, also, that you're sitting down as you read what we're about to say...

They hoped *what*?

For a moment Frank Mueller hoped only that he didn't have a heart attack. Who the hell in thirteenth century England wished him well?

Frantically puffing on his tobacco and sending out billows of smoke, he scanned faded words on a musty parchment page. He nearly bit through his pipe stem when he saw the signatures at the end. Was this for real? The manuscript was genuine; he'd made sure of that before he bought it. But this...this here had to be some kind of joke.

Gnarled hands trembling, he flipped back a page to a curious Latin verse written in the same flowery penmanship as the letter, the same antique script as the rest of the book. His gut clenched, telling him that somehow, against all logic, the story he'd just scanned was true.

Or it would be if he played his part.

Sounds filtered into his office from the front, the street door banging opened and closed, booted steps thudding over the floor...

Wheezing, he tiptoed to the office door and peeked out through a crack. His owl eyes blinked at the sight of a young man in jeans and leather jacket staring around the store.

The browser mentioned in the letter? Must be. They'd described him perfectly—almost. Studying him, Mueller noticed what Orlando had missed—a cell phone sticking out the top of the guy's jacket pocket. Not a gun as the kid had feared.

So that part was safe, at least.

But what about the rest?

His gaze shifted to the boy crouched by the paperback bin, then to the slender woman behind the counter, neither of them aware he watched them, both oblivious to the fact he held their fate in his hands. He could keep them here simply by keeping his mouth shut. Should he? Or send them on to meet their destiny?

His choice, and only seconds to decide.

Think fast, Frank.

Two precious people. People he cared about. People he'd miss like hell if they left. But people who deserved whatever chance at happiness he and the mysteries of fortune could give them.

His old eyes misting, Mueller silently closed the office door and returned to the manuscript on his desk, the message that had traveled eight hundred years to find him. Blinking back tears, he adjusted his spectacles, laid his pipe aside, and began chanting the verse aloud.

The Beginning



About the author:

<http://www.mimiriser.com>

Mimi Riser is a longtime author of both fiction and nonfiction, including several series and spanning a variety of genres (with flavors ranging from sweet to spicy hot). Her books celebrate the upbeat, the offbeat, and “beating the odds.” She began life in the urban northeast, but now resides in the rural southwest with her best friend and husband Rob.